

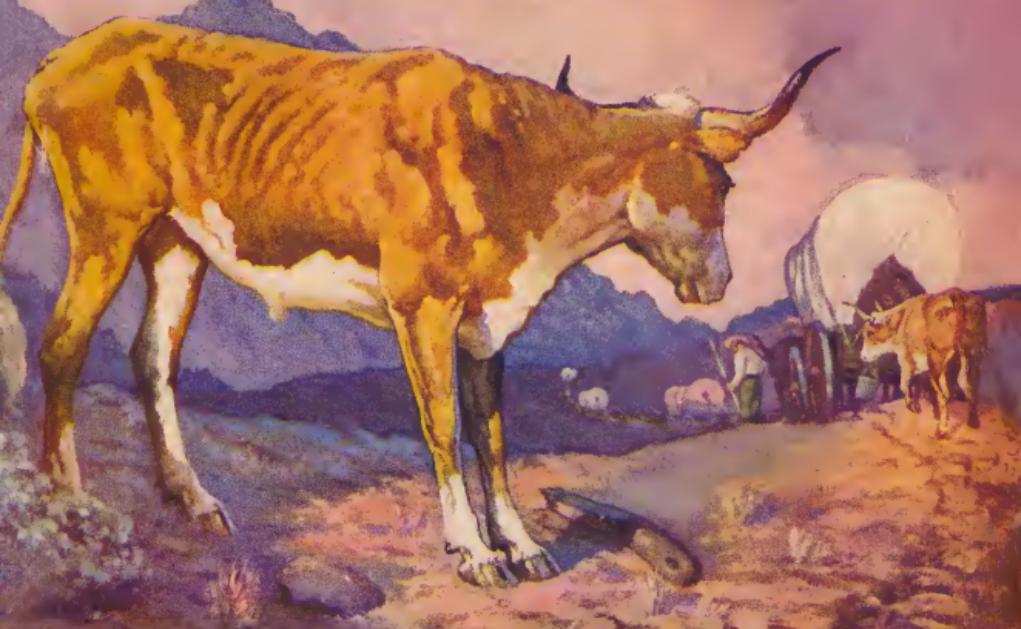
ALL WESTERN

10¢

MAGAZINE

APRIL

THE ROUGH STRING
BY WALT COBURN



R. Livingston Elwell

Health Authorities **WARN** Against **BULGING** Waistline!

The New York Times

LARGE WAISTLINE HELD HEALTH PERIL

Middle-Aged Man Who Keeps His Small Lives Longer, Government Bureau Says.

FIGURES SHOW DIRECT LINK

Overweight People Have Worst of It in Mortality Tables Covering 15 Causes.

WASHINGTON, Aug. 24 (EP)—The man who keeps his waistline small when he reaches middle age is the most likely to win the race for health, is the conclusion drawn from a new study of the relation of weight to physical defects just published by the Public Health Service. "By the time that middle age is reached, these figures indicate, it is a definite advantage to be under the average weight for height," says the report.

It also shows "a great excess of mortality among overweight persons, whatever the age, and also an excess among young adult underweight persons."

The conclusions are drawn from records of more than 3,000 men from 1909 to 1928, showing the ratio of actual deaths to expected mortality, according to different weight groups. In the following table, figures below 100 indicate less than the expected death rate; those above 100 indicate more than the expected death rate:

Age Group.	50 and Over
Weight Class. 20-29. 30-39. 40-49. Over 50 pounds or more underweight	105 93 77
10 to 20 lbs...101 94 76 85	
5 lbs. under to 5 lbs. overweight	92 84 87 92
10 to 20 pounds overweight	99 88 94 80
20 to 30 lbs. overweight	113 123 125 119
50 lbs. or more overweight	163 143 144 130

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ALL WESTERN

MAGAZINE



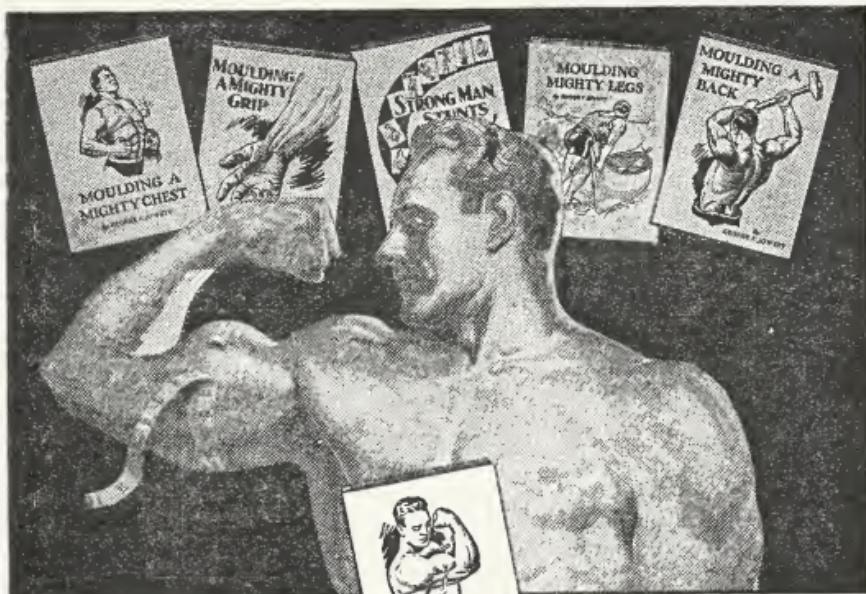
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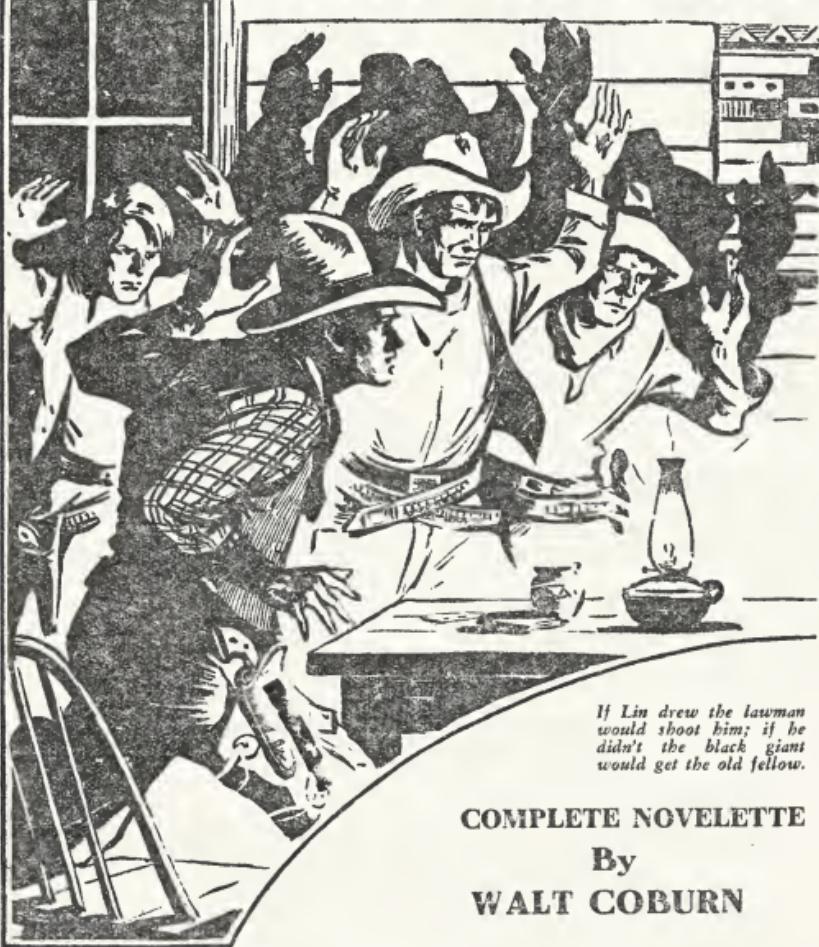
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(Mark in square which you would prefer to win.)

Buick and \$1,000.00, or \$2,500.00 All Cash

THE ROUGH



*If Lin drew the lawman
would shoot him; if he
didn't the black giant
would get the old fellow.*

COMPLETE NOVELETTE

By
WALT COBURN

Lin Marlin, bronc rider and top-hand, rated high in the opinion of The Old Gent. But Lin Marlin as a prospective son-in-law was a different proposition altogether. The Old Gent made that plain in a few words, then made out Lin's time in full.

"There it is, with an extra month's pay throwed in. Saddle up and drift. Don't let me ever ketch you again on the Two Bar range. Git."

Lin Marlin, tall, rangy, grinning faintly, nodded and left the ranch house. That first wave of hot anger he had felt when The Old Gent lit into him the way he had, now was gone. It wasn't in Lin's nature to pack a grudge long. Anyhow, not against that leathery little old cattleman with the white hair and neatly trimmed white beard and sapphire colored eyes. The Old Gent had been almost like a daddy to him since he

STRING



*Brothers Three, They
Knew no Law Save Bul-
lets; Then, That Night
They Tried to Run the
Cowman in Their Rope
of Greed, They Learned
that Empty Guns Can
Speak Louder than Lead.*

had first hired out there at the Two Bar ranch as horse wrangler. Just like Martha had been like a kid sister to him, up until a week ago when a chance accident had precipitated them into a different sort of love.

The white thing to do, Lin told her that day, was to go to The Old Gent and tell him. That was Lin's way. And Martha wouldn't have changed Lin's way for anything. The squareness of the tall cowboy was one of

the things that made her love him.

"It will be the end, Lin. He will fire you. He has said more than once that he'd never let me marry a cowboy."

"Your dad was a cowboy. Your uncle never followed any other business besides cowpunchin'. What's wrong with a cowboy?"

Martha Roberts smiled a little at that. "Of course there's nothing wrong with a cowboy, Lin. Tackle

him, pardner. But I know what he'll do. He sent me East to boarding school because he didn't want me to marry a cowboy and spend my life on a Montana cattle ranch."

Now with his pay check shoved in the pocket of his saddle warped overalls, Lin was telling himself that The Old Gent wasn't so far wrong, at that. The best Lin could offer a wife was years on a ranch. Cooking, washing dishes, mending his clothes, and no near neighbors. Lin's little spread, down on the bank of the Missouri River, where the Montana badlands meet the bottom land among the cottonwoods, was fifteen miles to the nearest ranch. And that ranch was owned by 'breeds who drank rot-gut whiskey and fought at the dances.

Not much in the shape of a home to offer a girl like Martha Roberts, niece of Two Bar Roberts, one of the bigger cattle owners of the cow country. Martha would some day inherit the Two Bar outfit. Lin's little spread was pitifully small by comparison. Lin reckoned that The Old Gent, as Two Bar Roberts was called by his cowboys, had it worked out right. Martha needed a better, far easier life than a cowboy could offer her on a two-bit ranch down at the edge of the badlands.

He saddled his private horse, loaded his bed on his pack-horse, and headed for home.

It hurt some because Martha hadn't said goodbye to him. She must have seen him loading his bed, there at the bunkhouse. But she hadn't even showed herself at a window to wave to him as he rode away. That wasn't like Martha. Lin reckoned she must have some reason, and it would be a sensible one. Sensible described Martha Roberts.

She had chestnut hair that was thick and wavy and had reddish tints in it when she was in the sun. Gray eyes, a small nose that freckled during the summer. A rather large, but shapely mouth, a firm chin. Strong,

white teeth that showed when she smiled. She was just the right height and had the build of an athlete. Long muscles that were not too hard to marr her feminine beauty when she wore a bathing suit. She swam well, rode with the easy grace of a cowboy, could handle a green horse better than lots of men.

Lin had taught her what she knew about horses and cattle. How to be patient with a bronc, never fighting him, never putting fear in the horse's heart, never breaking his spirit. And in Martha, Lin had found an apt pupil, even when she was hardly twelve. Twelve, orphaned, adopted by her uncle, Martha had grown up there at the ranch. Two Bar had hired a woman to teach Martha, and fit her for an Eastern school.

The teacher, a Boston spinster, had done her job well. And she had become like one of the family, there at the ranch. A tall, bony woman with mouse colored hair and bright, brown eyes. Martha had labeled her Aunt Hank. And it must be said of Miss Henrietta Smythe that she glорied in the nickname. Possibly because, never in her life had she ever been tagged with any sort of term of endearment.

Lin thought of Aunt Hank now because it had been through her that he and Martha had suddenly found themselves in love. Martha and Aunt Hank had gone horseback riding, a week or so ago. Aunt Hank's horse had gotten tangled in some loose barbwire. Lin's timely arrival and his quick action in picking her from the saddle as the fear-maddened horse lunged and pitched, had saved the woman from possible serious injury. Aunt Hank had fainted.

She opened her eyes to see Martha, sobbing and shaken, in Lin's arms, Lin holding the girl in what certainly was no brotherly embrace. Whereupon Aunt Hank had promptly closed her eyes and before she opened them again, had cleared her throat once or

twice and muttered an unmistakable, if somewhat shaky, "Well, I'll be damned!" After which she audibly counted up to five, then opened her eyes. Which naturally made her a party to the secret, a sort of fellow conspirator, a rôle which the spinster thoroughly enjoyed.

Lin grinned at the thought of Aunt Hank. Aunt Hank would be with Martha now, back there at the ranch. Lin had taught Aunt Hank to ride, had taken her on berry picking expeditions with Martha, and had talked The Old Gent into letting her and Martha spend a week with the round-up. And so it was that Aunt Hank had, night after night there at the ranch in the winter time, tutored the tall cowboy. So between them had been formed a lasting comradeship. Lin reckoned Aunt Hank was cooking up some sort of scheme, right now, mapping out some plan of campaign to win over The Old Gent to Lin's cause. And when Aunt Hank planned out a thing, it was just about a cinch bet that it would be worth consideration.

On the other hand, Lin savvied The Old Gent and his ways. Two Bar Roberts had a mind of his own and bore the reputation of sticking to any decision he made. And it seemed to the cowboy now, as he headed for home, leading his pack-horse, that the old cattleman was right.

The Crossen outfit had dickered for Lin's place more than once. Well, he'd sell it to 'em, lock, stock and barrel, then quit the country. There was New Mexico or Arizona or perhaps the Argentine country where a good cowboy could make a living. Yep, he'd sell out to the Crossen brothers, much as he hated them. The three Crossens had a fair-sized outfit back in the badlands on Hell Creek. They were a tough layout and it was a half-open secret that their ranch was a way station for drifting outlaws who needed a hideaway.

Lin swung eastward, quitting the trail, heading across country towards the Hell Creek ranch and the Crossen place.

It was past sundown when Lin reached the barbwire gate that he must pass through to get to the Crossen home ranch. It was better than three miles from that gate to the ranch houses, and those three miles were the roughest part of the badlands. It did not surprise Lin much when a rider showed up just as he was shutting the gate. The rider had on a cartridge belt and six-shooter and there was a carbine in his saddle scabbard.

"Travelin'?" asked the armed cowboy, "or just goin' somewheres?" He needed a shave badly, and his eyes were bloodshot. His horse showed sweat marks. He grinned faintly as he spoke but his eyes were calculating, unfriendly.

"I was aimin'," Lin told him, looping the gate shut with the old rawhide rope that was its means of fastening, "to go down to the ranch. I got a dicker to make with the Crossen boys."

"Any hurry?"

Lin did not miss the fact that the man's right hand was near his gun. And Lin's gun was in his war sack, there on the pack horse, stowed away in his bed. He would have to jerk loose a diamond hitch, dump his bed, fish out his war sack, then gouge down into a lot of shirts and socks and underclothes to get his gun. He reached for his tobacco and papers and leaned back against the gate post.

"I got as much time as you have, stranger. If you say so, I'll go on back the way I come."

"I reckon you won't. About an hour from now we'll ride down to the ranch."

Lin squatted on his heels, looking up from under his slanted hatbrim at the man on horseback.

"No need pawin' around at that gun," he told the rider. "Mine is in

my war sack and even if I had it on me, I wouldn't pull it."

Lin's indifference seemed to please the man, for he shifted his weight to one stirrup and hooked a leg across his saddle horn, then rolled a smoke.

"Live around here, somewhere?" he asked.

Lin nodded. "My place is down the river about twenty miles, at the mouth of Bull Creek. You might have passed there on your way up."

"My way up from where, feller?" The bloodshot eyes tightened a little.

"From where you boys probably crossed them horses last night. Now keep your shirt tail tucked in, pardner. I ain't lived down in the badlands without seein' things. Where you come from and where you are goin' is no hide off my back. I've seen plenty many things happen and never told any man about it. I don't mix up in things that don't concern me, if you know what I mean. I crossed the sign where somebody had fetched in some horses. How was the river?"

"High. We lost three head comin' over. So you're Lin Marlin?"

"I'm Lin Marlin."

This was cow country talk. Talk that spoke of a code peculiar to cattlemen and the hunted men who rode the outlaw trail. That code says that, so long as the outlaw does not rustle a rancher's cattle, butcher his beef, or run off his horses, that rancher holds no grudge. Catching outlaws is a business that must concern only the men who wear badges and are paid by the State or County or Government to hunt down those renegades who have broken the law. Lin Marlin had lived in the badlands long enough to know that. And he had never lost so much as a calf. His few head of cattle were safe. No man stole his saddle horses.

True, now and then a horse would turn up missing, but without fail the horse had been returned. From Mon-

tana to New Mexico the word had gone down the outlaw trail that Lin Marlin was a white man, and if ever a renegade broke the rules, he would be taken care of by his own kind. Thus it was that this bearded man knew of that ranch at the mouth of Bull Creek and he had heard of Lin Marlin. He stepped down off his horse and squatted on spurred heels, facing Lin. He pulled a quart bottle, half emptied.

"Drink, Lin?"

"Just ate a big bait of grub," lied Lin.

They talked of men and horses and cattle, of dry summers and hard winters, of broncs and stampedes, guns and gambling houses. Just range talk, swapped out there a lot of miles away from town. But Lin Marlin knew, all the time they were talking, that the other man was holding him there at the gate for some reason. A reason that concerned not only the matter of a few stolen horses that had been shoved up from Wyoming or Idaho. There was something else happening, down there at the Crossen ranch.

It was getting dark when two men rode up on them. In the dim light that precedes the night, Lin made them out. Pete and Bert Crossen.

Pete Crossen, a heavy paunched man with a bloated, red veined face and pale gray eyes set too close together under crooked brows. A man of few words, Pete Crossen, but when he spoke he had something to say that was worth hearing. One of the shrewdest cattlemen in the country, he was the real brains of the Crossen brothers. This in spite of the fact that he drank whiskey as most men drink water when they are thirsty.

Dangerous to cross in any sort of deal, wise in the ways of crooked cattle deals, he was feared, respected, and hated by every respectable cattleman in that section of Montana. No

man had ever heard Pete Crossen laugh, despite the fact that fat men are usually associated with mirth and a jovial mien. Pete Crossen's bulk, however, was abnormal, the result of hard drinking, hard living. Yet he could ride and rope with the best cowboys in the State and when he got actually drunk he was as dangerous as a wounded grizzly. A white froth would fleck his mouth and his words, blurred, thick, would drool from his lips and he smashed and tore things or jerked his gun and emptied it at the saloon lights. That was Pete Crossen.

Bert was younger than Pete by five or six years. A sullen-eyed man with one side of his face horribly marred by a red birthmark. He was rawboned, strong muscled, and had the temper of a maniac. A knife had scarred his nose and had left a vivid white line across the crimson birthmark that covered a hairless cheek. They said of Bert Crossen that he had ridden the toughest bronc in the country until the animal had dropped dead between his legs, and that Bert's brain had never been right after that ride. But they likewise said of Bert Crossen that he knew the working of brands better than any man who had ever made a living at brand changing.

It was Pete Crossen who spoke now, there in the twilight. His voice was heavy, harsh.

"H'are you, Marlin?"

"Can't complain, Pete."

"They tell me Two Bar Roberts sent you down the road a-talkin' to yourse'f."

"Who told you?" asked Lin, his voice taut.

"Hoot owl news. It travels acrost the range fast."

The man with the whiskers had stepped up on his horse and now rode away into the shadows of the bad-lands.

"Git on your horse, Marlin," said Pete Crossen, "and come on to the ranch. Then we'll talk turkey."

CHAPTER II

SINISTER RANCH

Lin mounted his horse and picked up the hackamore rope of his pack-horse. He had never liked the Crossens, and now they were more repellent than ever. The thick-faced Pete, the scarred, repulsive Bert. And at the ranch he would probably see Zack. Zack, who was swarthy, hawk nosed, beady eyed, and who was never seen without the white-handled gun he always carried in a holster that was tied low on his left thigh. Zack was right handed but he carried his gun on his left side, butt foremost, and he practiced every day, drawing and shooting at moving targets.

Lin's dislike for the Crossens amounted to loathing. He wondered, as he rode with Pete and Bert down the road to the ranch, which one of the Two Bar cowboys had beaten him down here. Which one of the cowboys who had worked under him had carried the news of his discharge to the Crossen ranch?

Even as Lin mounted his horse there at the gate, to ride with the Crossens, he knew that he would never sell his place to them. He could never let his horses be ridden by men like Bert Crossen. He could never let his log cabin be soiled by the sweat-odored Pete. And Zack would spend his spare time taking snapshots at Lin's rabbits and deer and the tame magpie and the old owl that lived in the big cottonwood. Lin had made friends with even the timid white-tail deer.

All those wild things, birds, animals, even two fat trade-rats, were company for him winter time when he fed cattle there at his place for the Two Bar outfit. No, he wasn't selling out to the Crossens. He'd spend the night at their place, then pull out for home. He'd give his grub and stuff to the 'breeds up the river. He'd give his horses to Martha. Then he'd ride on. Drift on to Mexico or the Argen-

tine. He'd leave the place he'd built up, there on the river. The log cabin, the barn, the cattle shed and the pole corral where he had gentled so many horses. He'd quit the country and leave it behind for keeps. But he wasn't selling out to the Crossens.

"Gettin' deaf?" growled Pete Crossen.

Lin grinned sheepishly. "What was it you was sayin'?"

"I was sayin', Marlin, that if you got one lick of sense, you'll th'ow in with us boys. It'll beat wages a-plenty. And you won't be workin' from daybreak till the stars come out, neither."

There was a cold glitter in the big man's pale eyes as he looked at

Lin. There was a leering grin on the disfigured face of Bert, who rode with the scarred side of his face to Lin. They were riding three abreast, Lin in the middle. Something about their manner told the cowboy that he was on dangerous ground. Anything might happen to a man at the Crossen ranch, where outlaws of all kinds gathered to drink bad whiskey and gamble and fight over money or a woman or some real or fancied wrong. More than one luckless man had ridden along this road, never to return. Nameless men who lay in unmarked graves or had been dumped in the river. The muddy old Missouri holds its secrets well. No doubting the fact that Lin Marlin had ridden into danger. He would have to play his cards cautiously.

"I'll think it over," he gave reply to Pete Crossen's offer.

He would have to stall for time, put them off, lie to them, to save his hide. They rode on in silence. It was an uneasy, unfriendly silence, charged with tenseness, tinted with suspicion. Lin, unarmed, was at the mercy of the two Crossens. Pete Crossen spoke at last.

"You and Two Bar Roberts must have shore locked horns?" It was a

well baited question. An almost direct challenge that Lin would have to meet either with the truth or with some clever lie. Any lying was far better than mentioning Martha's name in the presence of these two badland wolves who respected no woman.

Lin had rather anticipated that question and he had a fairly plausible lie ready.

"The Old Gent," he said, trying to act the part of a man who has been unjustly discharged, "jumped me about the short calf crop down on the river. He said I'd bin either dumb and blind or else I was workin' in with gents that dragged a hungry loop."

The calf crop down in the badlands was always short, due to the wolves, human wolves and four footed wolves that preyed upon the cattle and horses.

"So you beat Two Bar to it and quit?" leered Bert Crossen.

"The Old Gent was quicker on the trigger. He had 'er made out, and the ink was plumb stale on the check."

"You was with him a long time," Pete Crossen said, watching Lin through his pale eyes.

"Ten years this last Spring. I was just a button then. Fifteen, and I'd come up from Texas. My folks was dead and I'd drifted up with a trail herd from the Pecos country. When they shipped their cattle to Montana I come along. Two Bar's horse wrangler had bin fired and I got the job . . ."

"And worked yourself up to ramrod," put in Bert. "You was the white-haired boy, they tell me, and some said you'd be ownin' the spread some day when you married . . ."

"Shut up, you locoed fool," growled Pete Crossen, his face purple with sudden anger. "Learn to keep that ugly mouth of yours shut. Can't you keep that brain of yours off women? What woman could look at

that face without gettin' sick to her stomach?"

Pete's voice, thick, came through lips that showed little flecks of white foam. His pale eyes were congested, blurred. His face muscles twitched.

"Mind what the doctor told you," snarled Bert, his disfigured face twisted with anger, "about you kickin' the bucket one of these days when you get on the prod. Take it easy and don't make a gun play or I'll shoot. Some day I reckon I'll be crowded into killin' you."

"Don't open up with the gun poppin' while I'm ridin' between you," Lin said, and the grin on his face was forced.

These sudden, flaming quarrels between the three Crossen brothers were always discussed around campfires and bunkhouses in that part of the cow country. There were standing bets in Montana who would get killed when the three men started thumbing back the hammers of their guns. It was a strange bond that held the three brothers together. A bond made up of a bitter hatred and distrust for one another. Together they were strong, an unholy triumvirate that was a power in the badlands country.

Divided by death or lesser cause, no one of them could stand alone for long against the enemies they had made through years of ruthless preying upon those who were helpless against the three. It was a common love of greed that had always bound the three brothers. No brotherly love blessed their relationship. And some day or night there would be a showdown. Guns would spurt, roaring with deadly voices, the last bitter argument of hate.

The two Crossens, one on either side of Lin, rode now in a sullen, smoldering silence. Lin relaxed a little, though inside he was afire with a hot anger which he had bitten back behind clenched teeth. Bert Crossen's

unfinished reference to Martha had drained the blood from his lips. He wanted to kill that disfigured, foul-mouthed thing that could not speak without tainting his words with lewd profanity. Even as he wanted to grip the purplish, thick throat of Pete Crossen who had flared into hot anger, not because of his respect for the name of Martha, but because of jealous lust. Lin knew now how it felt to want to kill a man. If he had a gun, he would have tried his luck against them both. Give them two to one odds and shoot them out of their saddles. But Lin's gun was stowed away on the pack horse. And in that grim silence that had again fallen, Lin did his best to figure out what was to happen there at the ranch.

The three Crossens and the horse thieves would be there. The whiskey jug would go the rounds. There would be poker and black jack and craps. Quarrels, perhaps, and gun play. Lin Marlin would be the only man in that dangerous, tough, hard-fighting crowd who stood alone. And if he could reckon right, the only man not heeled with a gun. It piled up the odds against him.

He considered the matter of grabbing Pete's gun and cutting loose with it, but he knew that Pete might be wanting him to make such a move. Despite his bulk, despite the fact that he was drunk and had been drunk for years, Pete could handle his gun with sufficient speed to take care of his enemies. In that liquor-fogged brain of his was a cunning that made him as deadly as the warped-minded Bert or the fast shooting Zack. No, there was nothing for Lin to do except to take the breaks as they came.

Perhaps, there at the ranch, there would be some man among the gang who would take his part. Because Lin knew that those renegades who stopped at the Crossen ranch for a meal, a belt full of cartridges, a fresh horse, or to have a bullet taken out of their hide, paid well for what they needed. The Crossen ranch was a refuge for

the hunted human wolves, but no shelter had ever been given to any outlaw who could not, either then or eventually, pay well for what he needed.

On the other hand, Lin had never asked payment for favors he had shown those hard-eyed, grim-lipped drifting men who had stopped at his place now and then. He had asked no questions of them and had never taken a dollar for what he had given them. And they had ridden on, probably never to be seen again, on along that dim outlaw trail, carrying with them the word that Lin Marlin was a white man.

There might be a chance, there at the ranch, to make a fight. But not now. Not when he rode, sandwiched in between the paunchy Pete and the leering, sullen eyed Bert Crossen. And he kept wondering just how bad a mess he had blundered into. He had been to the Crossen ranch before. But this evening it was all different. There was a dangerous tension, a promised tragedy in the bearing of his two companions. Something big was about to break.

The lights were burning in the bunkhouse and stable when they got there. A couple of lanterns threw moving shadows on the walls of the big log barn as they unsaddled. Lin had jerked the bed from his packhorse when he looked up to see Zack Crossen standing back in the shadow of an empty stall, whittling a stick of wood. Pete and Bert Crossen had unsaddled and were watering their horses at the big trough outside.

"Lost, ain't you, Marlin?" Zack stepped out of the shadow.

Zack's white-handled gun showed as he stepped out into the lantern light. Zack was tall, well made, handsome in a dark, sinister way. Lots of women at the dance halls liked to boast that Zack Crossen was their man. At the country dances he was popular among the 'breed girls and the daughters and wives of some of

the ranchers who threw in with the Crossen clan.

Once, in town at a dance, Zack Crossen had asked Martha to dance with him, and Lin had overheard. Lin's fist had connected with the point of Zack's jaw.

"If you so much as look at her again," Lin had told him, "I'll kill you." And he had handed back the white-handled gun to its owner, there in the dance hall. Lin knew that some day this beady eyed gun-toter would try to kill him. Just now, there in the barn, the odds were in Zack's favor. Yet Lin showed no outward fear as he slid his hand into his warsack and the hard feel of his gun butt lessened the odds. He could, if needs be, shoot it out here and now. He deliberately took the gun from the sack and shoved it into the waistband of his overalls.

"I reckon," he told Zack, who stood there, a thin smile on his almost lipless mouth, "that I am about halfway lost. I rode here with Pete and Bert."

"You don't need to be tellin' me that, Marlin. I watched you ride up. Just what fetches you here, anyhow?"

Lin saw the ugly look on Zack's face. He saw the fingers of Zack's right hand spread slowly into a claw-like shape, a thumb hooked in the sagging cartridge belt. There was the odor of whiskey, mingled with stable odors.

Then Pete Crossen bulked in the doorway of the barn, his heavy face a purplish mask. His voice was grating, a little indistinct as the words slurred together.

"Keep that trap of yourn shut, Zack. I'm still roddin' this damned outfit. You better git over to the bunkhouse. I'll help Marlin with his two horses. Tell them boys at the bunkhouse that we're kind of entertainin' a neighbor from down the river. And quit hittin' the jug. You can't stand up under it. Hear me, you Mexican lookin' son? Hear what I'm sayin'?

"I'm still the big boss here. I'm still givin' the orders and you will take 'em as long as I'm livin'. Me and Lin Marlin has a deal on. You and that ugly muzzled brother of yours tend to your knittin'. Pete Crossen is boss here. If you don't think he is, reach for that purty gun of yours and I'll live to shove it down your throat. Lin Marlin is my meat. You horn into the game and I'll kill you like I'd kill a snake . . . Marlin, got a gun?"

"I got one, Pete."

"Hang close to it because you might need it. Vamoose, Zack. Take Bert along to the bunkhouse. Tell the boys that Lin Marlin just sold his outfit to us. I'm payin' him off in cash . . . Git . . . and I'll do all the drinkin' tonight for the Crossen spread. Clear out or I'll make you wish you'd bin born dead."

"I got a mule to ride with Lin Marlin," said Zack Crossen, his voice almost a whisper.

"Me and you," said Lin, his hand on his gun, "kin ride that mule now or later. Looks to me, however, that Pete is openin' the jackpot with four aces and the best you or me has got is deuces. And deuces ain't wild."

In that moment Lin felt like a man who has been stood with his back to the wall, facing, without a blindfold, the guns of a firing squad. Pete's heavy bulk now shadowed Zack. Pete Crossen, huge, wide of shoulder and belly, stood there between Zack and Lin. And there was something akin to the prophetic in the fact that Pete's broad back, an easy target, was towards Lin Marlin, and that the gun in his hand covered his brother Zack.

"If I was fittin' your boots," muttered Pete Crossen thickly, and there in the lantern light his bloodshot eyes stared down the beady black eyes of his brother, "I'd swap that white-handled gun for a railroad ticket somewhere. White-handled guns is bad luck. Especially when the gent that packs one hasn't the guts to use it. I'm ramroddin' this outfit. Git

that plain. You take my orders or you pull out. I'm tellin' you now to go to the bunkhouse. Are you goin' or am I givin' you a hunk of hot lead under your briskit?"

Lin knew that Pete Crossen, just now, was whiskey crazy. His big bulk swayed a little as he stood there, covering his brother with a six-shooter that was cocked. No doubtin' the guess that the gun had a hair-trigger, that one little pressure of that thick right forefinger would send Zack Crossen's soul to eternity. Yet Zack Crossen stood there as calm as a man could be. He reached for tobacco and papers and there was a twist to his thin, cruel mouth that might have been called a smile of some sort.

"Lin Marlin seems to be your meat, Pete," he said, his voice colorless, un-hurried. "Take him. Handle the deal in your own way. But don't forget what the doctor told you about . . ."

"To hell with the doctor!" mumbled Pete Crossen thickly.

"It will be to hell with Pete Crossen, not the doctor," said Zack Crossen, as he walked toward the doorway of the lantern lit barn. "It's up to you and Marlin. Luck to you both. Bad luck and a load of it."

Zack was lost in the darkness outside, now. Slowly, somewhat unsteadily Pete Crossen turned around and faced Lin.

"How much for your ranch, Marlin?" He had a fist full of paper money. The money was in his left hand. His right hand held the cocked gun.

"Is this a sale, Pete, or some kind of a hold-up?"

Pete Crossen put away his gun, letting the hammer down gently. He almost smiled, but his eyes were clouded with a film that accentuated, rather than detracted from their pale-ness. They were the eyes of a man who would kill.

"I have offered you five thousand for the place, Marlin," he said, "I'm

makin' it double or nothin'. Double if you kin see things my way. Nothin' if you keep on bein' mule headed."

"Double or nothin'," said Lin. "Ten thousand if I sell out and throw in with your outfit; is that it?"

"You hit the nail on the head, Marlin."

"And if I don't sell?"

"If I was you, Marlin, I'd sell. Ten thousand in cash is real money to any man. Even to Two Bar Roberts. And there's more where this dough come from."

"Where did it come from?"

CHAPTER III

PARDNER OF THE LAWLESS

Lin saw that he had made a mistake. The look on Pete Crossen's bloated face told him that. And it told him also the answer to his question. A few weeks ago a bank had been held up down near the Wyoming border. And a week or so before that there had been a train robbery. The outlaws had made a clean getaway from both jobs. Lin had heard the sheriff and Two Bar talking about it. The sheriff had reckoned that the outlaws might drift into Montana and use the badlands as a hideout. And the badlands meant that country close to the Crossen range. Pete was paying Lin off in money that came from those two jobs.

Lin knew now why he had sensed that danger. The men at the ranch, those same men who had come across the river with the horses, were not petty horse thieves but real outlaws. The horses they had crossed were spare mounts. It put Lin in a tight spot. They would kill him now if he did not throw in with Pete Crossen. He read that in Pete's eyes, and in the big man's thick voice when he spoke again,

"Men don't ask fool questions here, Marlin. There's ten thousand dollars in my hand." He held out the crumpled bills. "Want it?"

Lin nodded. He grinned faintly as

he wadded the money into the pocket of his overalls.

"We'll fix up a bill of sale at the bunkhouse, Marlin. Zack's handy with pen and ink. Handles a pen as fast as he does that purty gun he packs."

Lin knew, from what the sheriff had said, that some of the money taken in the train hold-up had been incomplete currency, lacking the two signatures that would make the money valid. He reckoned that Zack was the expert penman who had forged the two signatures on the banknotes that were creeping into circulation. Pete was buying Lin's ranch with stolen, forged money. He was making Lin a party to the lawless deal.

"Supposin', Pete," he said, "that I'd turned down your offer?"

"Marlin, you ask too damn many questions."

"I reckon I know the answer to that last one."

"I'd hope so. You better count that money before we go further. Just to make sure it's all there."

"I'll take your word for it."

"Count it." And Pete Crossen's voice had lost some of its thickness.

Lin Marlin took the money from his pocket. There, in the lantern light inside the barn, he counted it.

"Ten . . . fifteen . . . twenty thousand . . ."

Pete Crossen nodded, then took a few matches from his pocket. He squatted there on the floor of the barn, looking up at Lin. It might have been a smile that twitched the lips of the big man as he placed two of the matches there on the dirt floor of the big log barn. Lin, standing, looking down, watched. He still held the money in his hand, the twenty thousand dollars.

Pete Crossen laid out the two matches. Side by side, like railroad ties, an inch space between.

"What would that read if it was a brand on a critter, Marlin?"

"Two Bar."

Pete Crossen nodded. He took two more matches and placed them so that they formed an X between the two bars. Two more that made a square of the two bars, enclosing the X.

"Box X," he told Lin, gathering up the matches and putting them back in his pocket. "The Box X brand is recorded. The Two Bar earmark is an under-bit and over-bit. The Box X is an overslope and crop. That takes care of the pocket-knife work. See the idea, Marlin?"

Lin Marlin saw it. He understood now why the Crossens wanted his ranch. Working the Two Bar brand into a Box X would be as easy as flankin a month old calf. With Lin's ranch as a branding headquarters, the Crossens could steal The Old Gent blind.

"You'll keep on there at your place, Marlin. You only have to take 'er easy and live the life of Riley. Us boys will take care of the work. You put up your hay in the summer and do your rawhidin' in the winter time. Go to town now and then and let your spur straps out the draggin' hole. Me and Bert and Zack will sort of look after things. We'll be easy to git along with, Marlin, so long as you string your bets with us."

Pete Crossen was paying him twice what his place was worth, but he was paying off in stolen money. And he was offering, or rather forcing the cowboy into a lawless partnership.

There was only one thing to do, now. He'd have to play Pete Crossen's game for the present. When the sign was right he could tip off The Old Gent and put the Crossens in the pen where they belonged. That was Lin's one best bet.

Pete pawed around in a manger and brought out a brown jug. Before he uncorked it he hefted it, then shook it against his ear.

"No matter where I hide it, some of them whiskey thieves find it," he complained sourly. "Here you go, Marlin. Have at it. This ain't Injun whiskey, either."

Lin made a pretense at drinking, but little of the stuff went down his throat. With danger surrounding him he would need his senses. He knew what sort of a snake den he had gotten into. He knew that anything might happen before sunrise.

"I'll hire out for a tough hand, Pete, and play my string out."

"That," nodded Pete Crossen, "is the kind of talk I wanted to hear. Drink hearty."

After Pete Crossen had corked the jug and hidden it, they went on to the bunkhouse. The place was thick with tobacco smoke and there were two card games going. In the lantern light Lin saw the unshaved faces of a dozen men. Bert, Zack, one or two of the Crossen cowboys, the rest strangers. A hard-eyed, grim-lipped outfit squatting on the floor around blankets that were the gambling centers. No poker chips in evidence. They were betting real money.

"We might as well wash up and eat before we set into the game," said Pete.

They washed in a battered tin basin. There was a roller towel, slick with dirt, which Lin ignored, wiping his hands and face on his neck scarf and made out that he didn't notice Bert Crossen's sneering grin of contempt.

The cook was a giant negro with a huge goitre that added to his bestial ugliness. His apron was a badly soiled flour sack. Flies were thick. Unwashed dishes were piled on the long table. Pete ordered steaks and hot biscuits and told the negro cook that if he had to wait long, he'd gut-shoot his black carcass. The cook grinned widely, displaying strong, yellow teeth. No fear showed in his bloodshot eyes.

Lin had never before seen this black giant who had been cook at the Crossen place for several years. But he had heard of him and his drunken spells when he would run amuck with

a knife or an axe or a gun. Black Nick was his name, and he had done time in three separate prisons on killing charges. Somehow he had been freed, and now he was here in Montana, working for the Crossens, cooking, getting drunk sometimes, always ready to fight with any sort of weapon. It had been said of Black Nick that he was Crossens' hired killer and that the cooking 'job was only a blind.

The steaks were thick, cooked on the top of a red hot stove. The biscuits were hot, flaky. Pete spiked his strong black coffee with whiskey.

"Two Bar meat, Lin," said Pete Crossen. "We eat it, regular."

After supper they went to the bunk-house. On the way over, Lin saw men and horses at the barn. And yet, inside the smoke filled log bunk-house, there were the same number of men as before. Lin sat in the poker game. Bert Crossen was doing the banking. Zack Crossen was banking the other game. And before each of them was a stack of green and yellow money. Bert Crossen looked at Lin, his disfigured face a revolting mask. He broke out a new deck.

"Settin' in, Marlin?" he asked.

"For a while."

"You'll need change, then."

Lin grinned quizzically. "What for?"

"I'm changin' a few bills."

It was the renegade who had stopped Lin at the gate who gave Lin the explanation without speaking. From his pocket he took a brand new twenty dollar bill and slid it across the blanket to Bert. Bert pocketed the new twenty and gave back fifteen dollars. A ten and a five. The ten and five were not new. Bert and Zack Crossen were giving good money for stolen money and they were charging five dollars on every twenty that they took in from the outlaws. This was a sort of pawn shop for money that was dangerous to pass.

Lin handed over two twenties and got his "change". The game went on. He was learning more than he had ever hoped to learn about the Crossen outfit. He was learning a little too much, he told himself. It was not healthy to know too much about things of this sort. It was making him one of them. And if he did not play their game, if he weakened, if he went to the law with what he now knew, his life would be the forfeit. Lin saw the subtlety of the trap. He was tarred with the same black brush as these men who broke the law. Lin Marlin had turned outlaw. He must either ride that twisting, crooked trail or be killed for a traitor to the outlaw code.

The hours dragged along slowly. The jug passed its rounds. Lin won and lost. Mostly, he lost, because he kept thinking of The Old Gent, of Martha, of Aunt Hank and the Two Bar outfit, and his mind was not on his game.

Several men came in about midnight. One of them Lin was startled to see. That man was a Two Bar cowboy known as Gimpy, because he walked with a slight limp. Now Lin knew where the Crossens got their quick information concerning his discharge. Gimpy, a grizzled hard-bitten man of small stature, greeted Lin with a faint smile.

"I drawed my time after you got the can tied to your tail, Lin," he said.

"And beat me down here," added Lin.

"I was travelin' light. No pack horse. I didn't have time to git my bed." He looked down at Lin who sat, squat legged, on the floor. Lin tried to read the look in the eyes of Gimpy, but there was no fathoming what lay behind the short statured old cowboy's expression. Poker eyes. A poker face, if ever Lin had seen one.

He had never wholly trusted Gimpy, yet the man was a good hand anywhere you put him. Close

mouthed, willing, a man who never got in the way. He could handle a beef herd or lead circle in the rough country. And nobody had to uncock the broncs in his string. He had worked about a year for the Two Bar, and Lin had thought some of running a second round-up wagon and putting the grizzled, quiet mannered Gimpy in charge.

"What was your rush to quit the ranch, Gimpy?" Lin asked him.

"The Old Gent was huffy. Seems like he'd found out I'd been makin' a trip or two down here to the Crossen place. No tellin' how he found out, but he did. And he had a shotgun in his hand when he told me to pull out. Man, he was snuffy. Pawed and bellered like a bull and I quit the flats without botherin' to pack up my duds. I'd taken a short trail down here and beat you to it." Gimpy tugged at a drooping, gray moustache. He was one of those ageless men, who might have been forty-five or sixty. Square of jaw, clear eyed, his tanned face etched with lines put there by the weather.

Lin quit the poker game and shoved his money in his pocket. He got to his feet and eyed Gimpy for a long moment.

"So," he said coldly, "all the time you was drawin' Two Bar pay, you was workin' in with the Crossens?"

"That's about the size of it. And I reckon, mister, that we're wearin' the same kind of boots. I'm here. You're here. You got fired. I beat The Old Gent to it. You're workin' with the Crossen outfit and so am I so that puts us about even. Let's have a drink."

Lin's fists had been doubled. Now, slowly, deliberately, they unclenched. He had a game to play. A dangerous, desperate game to play to the finish. One false move now and he would be done for. He forced a grin and took the jug from Gimpy's hand. But when their eyes met, there was no friendliness. Suspicion, only. Cold, calculating suspicion.

As Lin handed back the jug, he knew that half the men in the bunkhouse were watching him and Gimpy. It suddenly occurred to him that he had almost bumped into Gimpy as he came out of The Old Gent's house. And he wondered if Gimpy knew the real reason why The Old Gent had fired his top-hand. Had he overheard that heated bit of argument before Lin's final check had been made out? Had Gimpy fetched to the Crossens the real facts, and had these renegades mouthed the name of Martha in connection with him?

There was a moment, a long moment just now when he wanted to kill that short, white mustached Gimpy who tilted the jug and drank. It took all his will power to fight down that white hot anger. There was a game to play. Big stakes. He was playing against odds, unknown odds. No time to let his temper get the better of him. He had a game to play.

Pete Crossen came in and made some sort of signal to Zack, who turned over the poker game to another man, then joined his brother. The two came over to where Lin and Gimpy were standing.

"I got the bill of sale made out," Pete told Lin. "Zack fixed it up. Bert will have to sign with us. Tell him to turn over his game to one of the boys. Gimpy will do for one witness. Fetch along another cowboy. Pick one that's never done time. We don't want to mess this thing up with the wrong kind of names on the paper. You ever bin in the pen, Gimpy?"

"Never served time in my life, Pete . . . not yet," and his hard, puckered eyes twinkled a little under the heavy gray brows.

Pete led the way to the log house where the three brothers lived. There in a littered room that served as a loafing place and office for the Crossens and their friends, Lin signed the bill of sale. The Crossens likewise signed the document. Gimpy and a

tipsy cowboy signed as witnesses. A drink all around consummated the deal.

"And now," Pete Crossen told Lin, "you're workin' for me, not for Two Bar Roberts. You'd might as well pull out for your place. Putter around there till you hear from me. I reckon I don't have to tell you what will happen if you turn coyote."

"I savvy," replied Lin.

"Gimpy will go along with you." Pete turned to Bert. "When will them Box X cattle be at the Marlin ranch?"

"Inside of a week if we have good luck."

"About five hundred head, Marlin," explained Pete. "Mixed stuff. They're the start of the herd. They'll be turned loose there. You and Gimpy gather what wild Two Bar stuff you can locate and when we git there, we'll make Two Bar critters into Box X critters just as easy as whittlin' a stick. Even the Box X bulls will be havin' twins."

Lin was as tense now as a tightly coiled spring. He looked at Pete, saw the watchful suspicion in the big man's eyes. Pete was not trusting him much. Then he saw the swarthy, thin lipped Zack, his hand near his white handled gun. The revolting face of the scarred Bert. Last of all his glance shifted to old Gimpy who stood there, tugging at his drooping white mustache. The tipsy cowboy had gone back to the bunkhouse.

"As easy," leered Bert, "as whittlin' a stick. Two Bar stuff into Box X stuff. But I'm wonderin' how tough a cow thief you'll turn out to be, Marlin. What Pete calls putterin' means that you'll swap your bed for a lantern and play out a tough string. How far will you go, anyhow?"

"That's what I'd like to know," added Zack. "I don't trust you, mister. Just why was you fired from the Two Bar outfit?"

"I told you once," said Lin, his eyes narrowing.

"And lied when you told us," sneered Bert, "or else Gimpy was lyin' about it. One of you two is lyin' and we'd like to find out which one it is. And when we find out..."

Pete's heavy hand caught Bert across his twisted mouth. And the big man's thick voice was an ugly snarl.

"When will you an' Zack learn that I'm runnin' this layout? Keep your traps shut from now on. Pull that gun, you mis-born son and I'll make you eat it. I'm boss here. I'll run this spread. Marlin knows better than to coyote on Pete Crossen. He'll take my orders. So will Gimpy."

"Ask Marlin why Two Bar Roberts fired him," Zack put in.

"I know why he was fired," muttered Pete Crossen. "Shut up."

Pete Crossen spat blood from his bruised mouth and he looked at the bulky Pete through eyes that were red slits. Hate was stamped on his terribly marked face.

Split seconds now in which Lin could make his choice. He felt trapped, cornered. He knew now that Gimpy had told them why he had been fired. They all knew the truth. And at least two of the Crossens suspected that he would double-cross them. It was a tight spot. Lin's narrowed gaze watched them as they stood around the littered table in the middle of the room.

There was a Rochester lamp there on the table that shed a tricky light through its cracked, smoked chimney. Whenever a man moved, his frame threw distorted shadows on the log walls and ceiling. The vision of Lin was more clear than that of the Crossens who had all been drinking. This gave him a little advantage if it came to a shooting scrape.

But Gimpy was sober, and Gimpy might turn out to be dangerous. Lin edged towards the table. One quick jerk and the lamp would be knocked over. But there would be that minute

before the room was plunged in darkness. A brief minute during which guns would spit fire. A minute during which death would reign. But it looked like his only chance.

CHAPTER IV

GUN OF THE LONG ARM

His eyes watched Pete Crossen who stood there, his back turned to Lin, and perhaps it might have been the uncertain light but it looked like Pete swayed a little. Lin could catch only part of his profile as the bulky Pete faced his two brothers. Bert, with blood trickling from a battered mouth. Zack, his dark face Indian-like in its lack of emotion.

"I know why Lin Marlin was fired," said Pete thickly. "That's the only reason he'd ever show up here. You two think it's a trick between Lin and Two Bar Roberts. I know it ain't. I know that Marlin has bin stuck on Martha Roberts . . ."

"Keep your dirty tongue off her name," gritted Lin, and then he suddenly went silent, staring at the three brothers.

He saw the three Crossens go rigid, saw their arms lift slowly. And he saw them, all three of them, staring past him. Lin's head twisted backward. He found himself looking into the twin barrels of a sawed-off shotgun. The man who held the gun was Gimp.

"Lift 'em high, Marlin. This goes for all of you. Step over to that wall and keep your hands in the air. Make a bad move and this scatter-gun goes off, pointed in your direction. I want you all."

It was then that Lin Marlin saw a gold badge that had not been pinned on Gimp's flannel shirt the last time he had looked at the old cowpuncher.

"Not a peep out of any one of you polecats," Gimp went on as they faced him, bewilderment stamped on their faces. Gimp stood there, covering them with the shotgun. His

puckered eyes were hard, steel blue, and the grim lips under the mustache twitched in a faint smile.

Lin had noticed that shotgun leaning against the wall. He hadn't paid any attention to it, much. He savvied Gimp's game now.

"Took a long time to round up this nest of snakes," the old law officer's voice was smooth, slow, drawled. "I was hopin', Lin, that I wouldn't have to include you in the deal."

Gimp stood there, a white haired, white mustached, bowlegged little man, the sawed-off shotgun in his hands. His back was to the open doorway that led into the shadowed room beyond. So he did not see what Lin saw. What the three Crossens saw. A black giant naked to the waist, barefooted, a butcher knife in one of his hands. Like a huge black ape, the lamplight accentuating his bulk. Black Nick crouched, ready to spring, the knife gripped, poised to plunge into the back of that brave hearted little old peace officer who stood there, his back turned to danger.

No time now to call a warning. Lin's right hand dropped to his gun. He shot from the hip. The lead slug sent the black killer down in a twisting, writhing heap. The knife slid across the floor and in front of Gimp. The twin hammers of the shotgun clicked harmlessly. But Lin didn't hear. Lin, disregarding the shotgun, had whirled to cover the Crossens. His back was turned to old Gimp who stood there, an unloaded gun in his hands. Behind him Black Nick lay groaning, black paws holding his stomach as blood came through his fingers.

"I'm in on this, Gimp," called Lin, and as he kept the three Crossens covered he wondered why that shotgun hadn't gone off. Or had it? He didn't know. Things had happened too swiftly. He was backing the three Crossens against the wall.

Gimp had tossed aside the empty shotgun and now had an old cedar

handled .45 in his hand. He stepped past Lin without a word, and there was the clink of steel as he deftly, swiftly handcuffed the three prisoners. He disarmed them and tossed the guns on the table. Then turned to Lin.

"I'm obliged, Lin. I didn't want to think you was a snake."

"We ain't out of the woods yet," said Lin. "There's that gang at the bunkhouse."

"They're bein' taken care of by now."

"You mean . . .?"

"That I've had men planted with this spread for a year, waitin' the signal. They're takin' the right kind of care of that gang."

Gimpy had crossed over to where Nick lay sprawled. The big black was moaning and cursing as he strove to stop the wound in his side with his hands.

"Plumb square through the belly, Nick," said Gimpy, his six-shooter poking the wounded negro's ribs. "You'll die in an hour or so. Got anything to say?"

"Nothin'."

"That bullet is lodged inside, Nick. You ain't got a chance to live. Do some talkin'. Who killed that boy called Colorado? Who killed Smitty? Talk while you got the chance?"

"Keep that mouth shut," called Pete Crossen. Pete, his left wrist handcuffed to Bert, his right wrist manacled to Zack, Lin guarding them. Pete's face looked purple, his tongue showed between his foam flecked lips. His eyes were all but hidden behind the thick pouched flesh on his cheek bones.

Pete Crossen was cursing Nick. Cursing him horribly, and the wounded negro cursed him back. Then Nick began talking. Talking of things that had happened here at the Crossen place in the badlands. Stolen cattle and horses, stolen money that was changed there at those poker games in the bunkhouse. . . . Murders.

Murders done by the Crossens and Nick.

Pete Crossen, his face literally black with deadly rage, lurched forward, jerking Bert and Zack with him. He aimed a kick at Nick's face, but the wounded man rolled clear as the high heeled boot grazed his head.

Then, with a rattling, horrible laugh, Pete Crossen collapsed. Bert and Zack, both fighting, were pulled with him to the floor. That horrible laugh filled the room. Now it was gone, leaving an awful silence. Pete Crossen had laughed for the first and last time. He lay there on the floor, a huddled bulk. And to that inert bulk were anchored the two brothers whom he had so bitterly hated.

Black Nick had quit talking. He lay there, the brownish white of his eyes rolling.

Then the door opened and some men came in. They had guns in their hands. Gimpy smiled grimly at them.

"Got 'em all, boys?" he asked.

"The whole gang, boss."

"One of you fetch the doctor from town. Tell him that he'd better ride hard if he expects you to save Nick's life. Ride close herd on those train robbers. Don't let 'em rabbit on you. Get word to Two Bar Roberts that I'll need a change of horses for me and these prisoners. He's wise to my badge. We have to ride hard till we get 'em safe in jail where they can't be rescued by their friends." He turned to Lin. "I lied about me bein' fired with The Old Gent holdin' a shotgun. Part of the game, Lin."

They left a man to attend to Nick, then rode away into the dawn. A grim cavalcade, that, as they rode up out of the badlands. Tied in their saddles, guarded, Bert and Zack Crossen rode along the twisting trail. Behind them was a stout horse that carried a burden wrapped in a tarpaulin.

At the head of the badlands Lin pulled up. "So-long, Gimpy. Good luck."

"Goin' home, Lin? Any word I kin take to the Two Bar ranch?"

"Headed for home," Lin told him. "No word to take."

As he hit the trail for his little ranch on the river, Lin thought of Martha and Aunt Hank and The Old Gent. They would get the story of the fracas at the Crossen ranch from Gimpy. He was glad that he had not killed Nick. Gimpy had dressed the wound and later told Lin that it was hardly more than a scratch. The bullet had torn through the thick muscles of Nick's stomach, making an ugly looking but not a dangerous wound. He had scared Nick into a confession. It was a well-earned triumph for Gimpy, who was a shrewd and efficient law officer, a veteran at the game. Gimpy had gripped Lin's hand when they parted. The puckered eyes of the old detective shone brightly.

"You saved my life, Lin. That empty shotgun came near bein' my ruin. One of my own boys had unloaded it, but I didn't know it was empty. I'm not forgettin' what you did."

So their trails had branched. Gimpy had gone with his prisoners. Lin was headed for his ranch. It would take a few days to pack up, then he'd drift on to a new range.

It was sundown when he neared the ranch, for the trail from the Crossen place was long, wandering in and out of the badlands, then back to the river.

Smoke came from the chimney, there at his cabin. Lin rode up, wondering who had broken the padlock on his cabin door.

Then Martha was framed in the doorway. She had on a plain little gingham dress and an apron. Her face was a little flushed from standing over the stove. Lin was off his horse and was holding her in his arms.

"But listen," he told her, a little later, "we can't do this, pardner. There's The Old Gent to consider. We can't hurt him."

"We's not going to hurt him, Lin. Aunt Hank should have been a diplomat. If she'd take it up, there would be no more wars. I... when I saddled up and quit the Two Bar ranch, Hank handled dad. I came on here, thinking you'd be here. Aunt Hank saw me ride away and then, instead of following me right away, she went in and said her speech to The Old Gent. What she told him, I don't know.

"He wasn't so hard to convince, according to Hank. You see, Lin, he thinks a lot of you. After you'd gone, he took it mighty hard. He and Gimpy had quite a talk, too. Then Gimpy pulled out. Something about the Crossens. The Old Gent was all excited. And when Aunt Hank got here she was beaming like a school girl. She kept me awake until dawn telling me how she and Gimpy are to be married soon. Can you beat that? Can you even tie it, cowboy? Hank and Gimpy! And she brought word from The Old Gent that you can tear up that check because he's stopped payment on it.

"And now you can put up your saddle and rest your horse. We're staying here until the circuit rider comes along in a day or two with his Bible to marry us. Aunt Hank is staying on as chaperon. Aunt Hank is at the barn, feeding the horses. When you find her, kiss her for both of us. Then both of you hurry back. Supper's about ready. We're having a real spread tonight. Beef and biscuits and beans and a can of peaches."

There was a trace of moisture in her eyes as she kissed Lin. Lin swung back on his horse, then rode at a lope to the barn where the packhorse already stood.

Aunt Hank had a pitchfork in her hands. Lin took it from her, then took her in his arms and kissed her. And somehow, there in that sunset, Aunt Hank no longer looked plain and homely.

"Come and get it!" called Martha from the log cabin doorway, "or I'll throw it away! Grub pile!"

TWISTED TRAILS

By JOHN WILEY

With His Life Weighed Against Five Thousand Dollars in That Range Feud Where Codes Called for Fists, He Found Death Comes as Cold from Fists as from Lead.



Life hung in his blows now, for defeat meant those eager guns would turn the range to blood.

"Buck" Parr hadn't stopped to figure the thing out. He didn't generally. Men as handy with fists and guns as Parr, and with his spread of shoulders and depth of chest, didn't have to get squint-eyed from pondering their moves, he didn't figure. Just two things brought him to the dusty huddle of buildings called Badger Butte —his horse and the need of a job.



If he had studied the cattle country from Chihuahua to Calgary he couldn't have picked a better town or gotten there at a better time. With a grunt of relief he pulled up his dusty, sweat-streaked bronc at the hitching rack before the Four-B Bar, so-called by its customers because the sign over its door read BADGER BUTTE'S BIGGEST BAR. Dismounting a little stiffly, Buck Parr headed for the saloon's twin swing doors.

From inside the big, brightly lighted and glittering-fronted emporium of drink and chance came a rising clamor of angry voices. This was shortly followed by an oath, ugly and brittley spoken. Then came the dully unmistakable smack of a fist of flesh.

Jumping forward, Buck Parr peered swiftly and cautiously into the saloon, and as quickly moved back. As he did a thud of boootheels pounded and scuffed toward the door. Immediately after, a pair of struggling men fought through the doorway onto the plank sidewalk, followed by a yelling, hooting crowd of cowmen.

At their approach Buck Parr leaped catlike to one side of flimsy swing doors and flattened himself against the solid saloon wall. He knew what often happened when two fighting, liquor-laden cowboys reached the open. And in his eventful two-fisted career, Buck Parr had had enough men shoot at him on purpose to keep him busy without stopping somebody else's stray bullets. Filling as little space as possible he remained flattened against the wall as the two swaying, punching men mixed furiously upon the sidewalk before him. Still in his stiffly rigid attitude Buck Parr waited with narrowing eyes as the combatants paused for breath, then squared off like prizefighters and went at one another anew with doubled fists.

Watching eagerly, the men from

the saloon jammed the doorway and overflowed onto the sidewalk space on either side of the fighters. In the brief time of the fight several passers-by along the street had paused also, and with every moment the crowd grew.

Intent on the fight, Buck Parr had paid scant attention to the onlookers. But now as one of them close beside him let out an ear-piercing whoop of encouragement to one of the men, Parr glanced at him. The man was lean, wrinkled with age and carrying one arm in a sling. In his alert, excitement-brightened eyes, as he faced the fighters, there glowed an almost boyish battle-joy.

"Hit 'im, Newt. Knock his block off. It's Jim Hatton tellin' yuh, and I know yuh can do it!" the speaker yelled, dancing back and forth before the fighters.

But a moment later the excited Hatton found himself in the fight closer than he cared to be. Swinging heavily the opposite man missed, and the force of his blow carried him stumbling toward Hatton. Seeing his danger, Jim Hatton tried to back out of reach. But as he moved, the heel of his high-heeled boot sank and stuck tightly in a crack between two of the wide-spaced sidewalk boards. For a space he swayed and waved wildly, then sat down swearing helplessly.

Savagely intent on the fight, the man struck at, whose back was toward Hatton, backed quickly to gain room to swing at his forward lurching enemy. The next instant they had met and were again slugging furiously, almost on top of Hatton.

At this Buck Parr held back no longer. Parr did not know that Jim Hatton was owner of the sweeping JH ranch. He saw only a crippled old man in danger and he acted promptly. His shoulders squared and he thumbed briefly at his sagging gun belt. Lithe as a mountain lion his brawny broad-shouldered figure

edged forward, and he spoke commandingly.

"Stop it! Get out in the street if you're going to fight like a couple of blame chicken roosters. Do you want to tromp on the whole town with your foolishness? What's ailing you fellers anyhow? Won't them guns you're wearing shoot? You will, huh?"

Buck Parr's voice paused, then rose growlingly. Ignoring his opponent the man facing Parr had swung savagely at Buck Parr for interfering. Glimpsing the move, Parr side-stepped, and swung vigorously in return. His knotted, leathery-knuckled fist caught the fighter on the jaw in a blow that collapsed the receiver several feet away among the rooters of his side of the circle. He stayed down!

Seeing their man was licked, a savage yell rose from the men about the fallen fighter. This was followed by a volley of hoots and taunts from the almost equal number gathered behind Buck Parr and Jim Hatton. There was a pause, strained with danger as the two groups of angry cowmen faced. Features of both sides hardened granitelike; hands began to creep purposefully toward gun butts.

In another moment there would have been a general free-for-all street fight, and with pistols instead of fists. Sensing the desperateness of the situation old Jim Hatton whipped his big six-shooter from its belt holster.

"Hold it! I'll plug the first man that goes for his gun! What's the matter with yuh gents. Have yuh forgot the agreement?" he yelled. With the gun covering the opposite group, Hatton drew his heel from the crack and rose cautiously. Nodding to Buck Parr to keep beside him, Hatton backed swiftly against the nearby saloon wall.

"Huh, a fine 'un you are to be pulling that stall about our agreement, with a gun in your hand!" came a sneering growl. With face set harshly

the speaker pushed forward from the opposite side. Appraisingly his shrewd unwinking eyes switched from Hatton to Buck Parr. "Who's this feller? I don't recognize him as none of your outfit," he questioned Hatton.

"He's one of my crowd if he wants to be, hired this minute for the JH!" Hatton snapped. "Anyway, he wasn't mixin' in the fight till I caught my heel in a crack and was about to get stepped on," Hatton explained. A mutter of assent arose from the onlookers. Sensing that even his own followers admitted the truth of this statement, the questioner let the matter stand. With a final glare at Hatton and Parr he strode off down the street, followed by about half the assembled men.

As the crowd scattered old Jim Hatton piloted Buck Parr briskly into the barroom.

"I'm goin' to make good on that job if yuh want it," he said, as they ordered drinks. "Thad Murdock, the feller that talked out there, is owner of the Bar-M, adjoinin' my range for miles. And as a neighbor I'd prefer a spotted loco-skunk any time. He's a born trouble hunter. I always tried to get along with him. But three or four months back when one of my riders was killed by Murdock and his men on my range, a regular shoot-on-sight range fight set in.

"Murdock was glib enough in explainin' that they were after some of their strays and had been set on without cause. But havin' missed a lot of yearlings in the past few months we suspected Murdock and his fellows were after the JH stock and bein' caught red handed had killed our man to keep him from tellin' what he'd learned. Since then we've both lost more men than I like to count. So a couple of weeks ago when Murdock suggested a peace talk I was glad to listen.

"Murdock said it'd be too much to expect men that'd been scrappin' like

our outfits had to stop all at once. His plan was to quit usin' our guns. Fight if anyone wanted, but with fists. I'd got winged in the arm and two of Murdock's men damaged pretty bad in the last scrap, so I agreed with Murdock on the plan. That's the conditions yuh'll face if yuh take a job with me," Hatton ended.

"Well, since I feel pretty capable with my fists I don't see I've got any kick. Anyhow, fist fighting won't cause much damage," Parr said.

"Humph, it's goin' to with my side 'less things change," Hatton cut in. "It happens that Thad Murdock has run in a big two hundred pounder called 'Roughneck' Larsh. Murdock's side had been steadily gettin' the worst of it with guns, and doubtless Murdock had this feller in mind when he made me the proposition he did. If Murdock had been stealin' JH cattle or was considerin' a range grab, it would be a mighty good move for him.

"Already this feller has laid up so many JH men that several of my fellers are sayin' unless they can use their guns again they're goin' to quit. And the more that leave the fewer there will be to watch my cattle and protect my range," Hatton said.

Buck Parr's eyes glowed. "Well, don't let Larsh worry you any longer. I'll handle him. I learned fist scrapin' from a 'Frisco prizefighter that stayed one season at a ranch I worked," Parr said.

"Fine! But remember this Roughneck Larsh ain't no ordinary scrapper. He wasn't in that bunch out there, though I hear he's in town. I don't reckon Thad Murdock is riskin' him on the streets much, bad as my JH fellers have it in for Larsh. And now for yore good and so's not to give the thing away I think yuh'd better get quietly on out to the ranch. I'd send some of my men with yuh but that'd be a dead give-away that I've hired yuh. And if yuh just ride off alone, nobody'll know whether yuh're

goin' to work for me or not. Yuh can't miss the ranch," Hatton ended giving Parr brief directions.

Several men were loitering along the dark street, the ends of their cigarette butts glowing redly in the night as Buck Parr quit the saloon. But he paid them scant attention. Mounting his horse at the hitching rack he rode casually down the street until he reached the outskirts of Badger Butte. Then turning in the direction Jim Hatton had given he headed straight for the JH.

But in spite of his precaution, scarcely half an hour had passed before Parr became convinced that he was being watched. Reining up abruptly he listened and stared backward, under cover of making a cigarette. There was nothing unusual to be heard or seen. The distant yap of coyotes and the hoot of night-hunting horned owls came distantly over the sage-scented prairie. But close about him it was so still he caught plainly the squeak of a family of wood's mice in a near-by thicket of chaparral.

With an irritated growl Buck Parr urged his horse on through the black moonless night. A hundred yards had been covered. Two. Three. Then of a sudden Parr jerked his horse sharply to a stop. So that was the trouble! Whoever it was, had set out ahead of him instead of following. Staring intently before him, Parr made out the mounted forms of four waiting riders.

For a swift thought-crowded moment he was tempted to turn about and head for Badger Butte. Not that he was scared. With a body like seasoned oak, the ammunition loops of his gun belt plentifully filled with cartridges, and the ability to jerk his six-gun quick as the next man, Buck Parr hardly knew the meaning of fear. But range-wise as he was, he did know that many things could happen under cover of night in a feud-torn locality.

It was only for a moment though that Parr hesitated. Four to one were heavy odds, in case of trouble. But as yet the riders had made no hostile move; and Buck Parr's ears burned at thought of what might be said of him if he headed for town and the riders later turned out to have been friendly. A fine example he'd be for old Jim Hatton's men! With watchfully narrowed eyes he rode ahead.

At Parr's approach the riders spread out two on each side of the trail. For a moment Parr thought they meant to let him pass, that his apprehension had been unwarranted. Then, with jaw tensing, he sensed that the move had been merely to make more certain his capture. Waiting until he was directly between them the riders wheeled their mounts sharply inward. One of the four, a huge giant of a man, with long thick arms and knots of shoulder muscle that could be seen even in the dark, spoke in a rumbling chest growl of triumph.

"Me an' these gents is some of Thad Murdock's Bar-M fellers. Notin' that shiner yuh give one of our men in front of the saloon we thought yuh might crave a little more action. We figured if yuh come this way it'd prove yuh'd been hired by Hatton. But yuh can still prove otherwise by decidin' different now. And in case Jim Hatton mentioned me, it may help yuh in decidin' to know that I'm Roughneck Larsh!" the speaker said.

Buck Parr mustered a thin grin. But under the wide brim of his range hat his narrowed eyes gleamed hard and cold as flint arrow heads. He could prove otherwise, huh? Could save a scrap by quitting his new job cold and leaving old Jim Hatton in the lurch! At the thought Parr's teeth clenched.

"Go to hell!" he challenged brittely.

"All right. Get down and get yore lickin'!" It was Roughneck Larsh that spoke, and there was a disquiet-

ing certainty in his tone that took on sinister significance in Buck Parr's mind as he watchfully dismounted. Again the memory of the tense groups before the saloon rose in Parr's mind, and he realized how thin was the truce that held the two outfits.

Even old Jim Hatton had admitted that the arrangement had been suggested by Thad Murdock for his own advantage—and if Murdock's side lost doubtless the truce would fail. Buck Parr didn't care if it did. But he didn't want it said that he had caused the gun feud's renewal. In a single flash almost, the facts arrayed themselves in Parr's mind, and he made his plans.

As Parr dismounted, the four Bar-M men did likewise. Scarcely had he trailed the reins of his mount when Roughneck Larsh lurched forward and swung savagely. In his eagerness to get in the first blow Larsh miscalculated his reach, long as it was. The punch had little real force as Larsh huge fist met the side of Parr's head. But, turning as Parr had been, it staggered him, knocking his hat off, and brought a yell of joy from the three onlookers.

Buck Parr's eyes flamed and his shoulders tensed. Instantly his right fist swished up and connected jarriugly with the giant's jaw. The blow would have felled an ordinary man. As Parr had guessed, it scarcely staggered Roughneck Larsh.

"Yuh will, huh!" Larsh growled in a bellow of rage. With his great arms swinging like twin pile drivers he closed in.

Facing the mighty rain of blows that Roughneck Larsh directed at him, required every ounce of Parr's brain and brawn. Hardly a minute had passed before the swift rush and struggle of the fight sent him backing unconsciously toward one of the watchers. Waiting silently until he was in easy reach the Bar-M cowman loosed a stinging blow to Parr's neck,

whooping in savage joy as his fist connected. Caught unaware and half dazed from the jar on his neck, Buck Parr staggered sideways, to meet the fist of another of the men from that side!

Pausing briefly, Parr swabbed at a crimson streak coursing warmly over his mouth and chin from a nose blow. For a single timeless instant his gun arm tensed, and the will to kill blazed nakedly from his thinly narrowed eyes. Then Roughneck Larsh leaped at him with swinging arms, and Parr's fists knotted and lifted.

Ceasing to make any effort at forward fighting he gave himself over grimly to maintaining an alert defense and to avoiding the three sinister onlookers. Shortly, with his features a gory mask from the red that streaked his face from his bleeding nose, Parr held up a hand.

"That's enough, Larsh!" he muttered thickly.

Roughneck Larsh paused, breathing heavily and wiped his sweaty face. "Huh, there's no more danger in yuh than in any other of Hatton's men. I thought yuh were a real fighter. I could have licked yuh alone and easy. Go on to Hatton's if yuh want and are game. But every time we meet I'm goin' to repeat this dose, and worse each time!" Larsh sneered.

Buck Parr said nothing. Silently he remounted and continued his ride. He had done what he'd decided on, had fought rather than turn back. He had taken a beating from four men rather than break the truce between the two ranches by pulling his gun. This had been his whole aim at the time. But as he rolled a cigarette, his brow wrinkled thoughtfully.

More and more as Parr considered the matter, he became convinced that there was some purpose to the actions of Murdock's men which did not show on the surface. As mile after mile flowed smoothly backward under the brisk hoofs of his horse, though he failed to fathom it.

Nor had he reached a solution as the darker shadowy bulk of Jim Hatton's JH home ranchhouse, bunkhouse and corrals hove finally into view. Putting the matter from his mind he looked after his horse and sloshed his face with water from the tin pail and pan on the bench outside the bunkhouse door. Finding a bunk that showed itself to be untenanted he dropped into it and was asleep at almost the same moment.

Later in the night Buck awakened briefly from the sound of the men's return; then fell asleep again not to rouse until broad daylight and under the urge of old Jim Hatton's hand briskly shaking his shoulder.

"Come out o' there, young feller. The men are up and eatin' and I've got big news to spill!" Hatton began cheerily. But his voice faded away to a squeak as Parr sat up and the light fell on his grimy garments and the reddish spots that still clung to his eyebrows and hair. "Tarnation! What's happened? Yuh look like yuh've come out second best with a cyclone," Hatton sputtered.

"I'd about as soon it had been," Buck Parr admitted. Briefly he told of the encounter with Murdock's four men.

As Parr talked, Jim Hatton's wrinkled face seemed to gray and age in the early light. "They licked yuh! Roughneck Larsh licked yuh?" he asked weakly.

"I guess they'd call it that. Why?" Parr asked.

Hatton sat down on a rough bench before the line of bunks and ran his wrinkled hand dazedly through his thatch of graying hair. "Oh nothin'. Never mind. Hell's fire, yuh did yore best. And I might have expected somethin' like that from Thad Murdock. But last night after yuh left, Murdock hunted me up and gibed me about yore scrappin' ability, and I admitted hirin' yuh. I ought to have

had better sense and it's all my own fault.

"But the confident way yuh sailed into that feller before the saloon, then yore sayin' in our talk yuh'd been trained by a regular prize fighter, and mentionin' what yuh'd do to Larsh when yuh met, all sort of made me lose my judgment. And I bet Murdock five thousand dollars yuh could whip Roughneck Larsh in a fair fight here at the ranch this mornin'!" Hatton ended.

Buck Parr said nothing. He was too busy thinking. He knew now the hidden meaning of Thad Murdock's move. Knew Murdock had craftily sent Larsh and the three men out to waylay him and beat him up if he headed toward the JH. Then assured that Parr would either be gone entirely or in no condition to fight if he reached the ranch, Thad Murdock had hunted up reckless excitement-loving old Jim Hatton and lured him into the bet!

At the conviction a grin of grim humor spread over Parr's rugged weather-tanned features.

"Cheer up. Except for a few bruises and sore spots I'm as good as I was. I'll fight Larsh! You see I didn't know what it was all about last night when I met them skunks waiting for me. But I did figure if I flew in like a bob cat and attempted to claw up all four of them it'd likely end up by their going for their guns. And that with four against one, then I'd probably not only get the worst of it, but they would say I'd gone for my gun first and use the fight as an excuse for breaking the gun truce," Parr explained.

"Son, yuh're a wonder! A down-right dyed in the wool he-wolf from the head waters of Bitter Creek! Except that I'd made that bet iron-clad, and stand to lose it if we back down, I'd be the last man to ask yuh to go through with this scrap till yuh're rested up some from last night. But if yuh can fight good as yuh can

think, it'll take a railroad locomotive to stop yuh!" old Jim Hatton said.

All ranch activity had ceased for the fight. With half of the JH outfit nursing bruises from Roughneck Larsh's knuckles, it would have been impossible to get one of them to miss the scrap. Nor was the fight interest confined to the two ranches. Shortly after breakfast men began to arrive from Badger Butte. The first ones explained that they had just happened to drop in for a chat, but they remained.

As the crowd increased, the callers openly admitted their purpose. With bets passing freely back and forth all waited eagerly for developments. About ten o'clock, when Thad Murdock and his some thirty hard-bitten followers appeared, an exultant yell went up from the crowd. For regardless of which side they favored, all sensed that a mighty battle was to be waged.

Nor was this feeling lessened as Murdock's men dismounted and approached in a body. At their head walked the strapping figure of Thad Murdock, with the even taller and more rugged form of Roughneck Larsh beside him. There was not a man of the crowd but wore a heavy six-gun, many of them two. The fact that all had tethered their saddled horses along the outside of the corral fence as if for quick departure, lent an ominous reminder that the truce between the ranches was a truce and nothing more.

With all vestige of friendliness lacking, brief arrangements were quickly made. This consisted mainly of choosing a level spot of ground for the fighters. There was amazement in Roughneck Larsh's narrowed eyes as he faced Buck Parr, surprise probably that the other should dare face him again at all. And an equal surprise that Parr showed so little the effects of the fight of the night before. Larsh made no reference to their meeting

but Parr guessed what he was thinking as he saw a confident sneer curl Larsh's lips. He was thinking that having whipped Parr once it would be easy to repeat the success.

As Parr's gaze ran briefly over Larsh from head to foot he felt almost that Larsh was justified in his confidence. In the broad light of day Roughneck Larsh loomed even more menacing than on the previous night. He was hugely built. His chest had a barrel-like lung capacity and his already clenched fists hung like war clubs low on each side of his body.

Suddenly those fists began to occupy Buck Parr's whole attention. Briefly, brittle with tension, old Jim Hatton gave the word. At the instant he did Roughneck Larsh rushed forward, arms swinging. Parr attempted to stand his ground. To give blow for blow. Instantly he faced a savage storm of flying fists. Fists that rasped like a file when they grazed their mark. That had the jar-ring force of a battering ram when they connected!

Before their fury Parr found himself driven backward step by step. Then by grim effort he got in a real blow. Sent a solid, straight arm jab to Larsh's jaw. The punch landed with a crack that almost split the skin of Parr's knuckles. Although the blow staggered Larsh, he kept to his feet.

With a brief vision-clearing shake of his massive head he made another bull-like rush, eyes glaring.

Gamely, grimly, Buck Parr met him. Standing toe-to-toe they mixed in a fierce, furious whirlwind fight, a terrific series of give and take blows, of stumbles and recovers, of savage rush and desperate defense. They seemed evenly matched. Parr's advantage in skill was offset by Larsh's greater size and reach. Neither could win.

Buck Parr knew, sensed, felt the crushing power of Larsh's ironlike

fists. Realized that his best chance lay in skill. But he doggedly scorned a game of dodge and footwork in those first few seconds of brute-force fighting. Through it he invited disaster, allowed one of Roughneck Larsh's mighty fists to pass his guard with undiminished force, to connect solidly with one shoulder!

The blow, resistless in force, staggered Parr back and spun him half around. Before he could straighten, Larsh was upon him and they clenched. For an instant Larsh's broad, beard-stubbled face was close to Parr's, eyes glaring savage confidence. Lowering his voice to a husky whisper he spoke.

"That beatin' last night ain't nothin' to what I'm going to give yuh here before these folks," he taunted.

It was the first reference to the night before. Recalling it now as he faced Larsh brought the treacherous fight fresh to Buck Parr's mind. At the recollection a swift hot surge swept over him.

"Yeah? You and how many more? Why, you big blustering four-flusher. I didn't give you half what I had then! I was saving it to show you up before somebody that'd tell the straight of it!" Parr snapped fiercely.

But through the red mist of fury that swam before Buck Parr's gaze he saw Larsh's face change, saw his jaw slack and a look of alarm spring into his glaring eyes! For an instant Parr was puzzled to account for the expression. Then he realized the cause. Having talked with no one except the three men concerning the fight, Larsh naturally thought until that moment that Parr had done his best! Now at the words, spoken quickly and hotly, Larsh realized they were true. That he had a far different man to whip here, before witnesses, than he had had the previous night!

The knowledge put Roughneck Larsh doubly on his guard. Breaking the clinch he backed warily away. But now having warned him Buck Parr gave Larsh no time to form a

new line of attack. Parr took the lead! Following Larsh's retreat he pounded him in a driving rain of blows, delivered with fists like leather-covered bone, and launched with the skill and cunning he had learned from "Frisco Ed" Sanders, who had learned fighting on the 'Frisco waterfront!

From the milling, closely packed ring of watchers a mighty yell went up as they sensed the change; noted and added fierceness in the renewed surge of close-up fighting. And one of the loudest cheerers was old Jim Hatton. Forgetting the half healed bullet wound in his cloth-slung arm he leaped and whooped, wild with joy.

At the deep-throated roar of yells, Roughneck Larsh seemed to lose his head entirely as he realized the cheering was mainly for Buck Parr. Pausing briefly he wiped away a gory trickle staining one bristle-stubbled cheek. The sight of his own blood on his fingers acted as a red flag to a maddened bull. His eyes glared murderously.

"Blast yuh!" he roared at Parr. "I'll knock yuh off yore feet, then boot yuh till you won't know yoreself in a mirror. Yuh wouldn't go for yore gun last night liked we hoped yuh would. But shortly now yuh'll wish yuh'd settled it with bullets instead of waitin' for what yuh're goin' to get!" Wordless with blind killing fury, Roughneck Larsh ceased to speak and leaped in like a quarry-stalking cougar to the kill.

There was no doubt in Parr's mind that Larsh meant every word. In spite of his confidence of knowledge and strength, Parr felt a chill spine-tingle of apprehension as he faced the maddened charging giant. If he lowered his guard for a moment, was knocked down, or tripped and fell, a terrible mauling awaited him! For a moment the knowledge threatened to rattle Parr.

Then under the urge of the desper-

ate necessity his mind cleared. All his nerve, skill and strength surged alive, seemed to combine in a single fighting unit. Side-stepping Larsh's blind rush coolly, Parr swung a smashing right to Larsh's jaw, felt it connect solidly, saw the other go down for the first time!

Roaring oaths, Roughneck Larsh leaped to his feet. Instantly he rushed again. Instantly he was again met by Buck Parr. Taking a terrific rain of flesh-pounding punishment, Parr stubbornly stood his ground until he won an opening. Then with all the rugged force of arms and shoulders he drove home a terrific right and left. The left, rising straight up to the jaw snapped Larsh's head back as if it were hinged. As Larsh staggered back, Parr's right fist carried a jolting full-arm punch to Larsh's body. Catching Roughneck Larsh centrally in the boneless triangle where the ribs stopped, Parr's swishing fist sank in as if driven against a feather pillow!

With a wheezing sound, half gasp and half groan, Roughneck Larsh doubled in the middle like a closing jack knife. The color drained from his leathery face, leaving it putty yellow. An instant passed, another and another while Larsh bent, fighting desperately for breath.

As he bent a fierce yell went up from the onlookers. Roughneck Larsh's last threatening words, with his mention of the previous night, had been uttered aloud in his reckless wrath. Catching its significance the last vestige of sympathy of the onlookers for Larsh had vanished. Well enough they knew that in a similar case he would have made savage use of his advantage.

"Down 'im! Knock him down and give him yore boots like he promised yuh!" came a wild chorus of excitement-maddened advice. Ignoring it Buck Parr waited grimly for the other's recovery.

But even then Roughneck Larsh was not done, not beyond a final bit

of underhand trickery. As if on the point of falling any moment he staggered toward Parr, hands clasping his middle. Then as he gained in reach he sprang forward, mighty sweat-streaked arms reaching gorilla-like for a grapple hold.

Had Buck Parr not known the trickery of Larsh from the night before he might have been caught unaware. But as a branded steer fears even a cold branding iron, so Parr suspected Larsh even in apparent helplessness and was on his guard. As Larsh sprang with outstretched arms for a clench Parr stepped toward him, drove a second terrific right to his jaw and a left to his throat as his head rose—and the fight was done! Roughneck Larsh's huge figure crashed to the trampled earth. Making no effort to rise, with eyes dazed, he lay there breathing heavily.

Seeing Larsh down, realizing the fight was done and that his five-thousand dollars were lost in spite of his planning, Thad Murdock galvanized into life. During the fight, he had watched unmoved from start to finish. But now as the beaten Larsh failed to rise, a wicked oath broke from Thad Murdock's tight lips. Leaping suddenly forward he kicked Larsh savagely.

"Get up and fight, you crawling quitter! Think I'm going to lose all that money because of you? Get up, or I'll put a bullet in you that'll keep you there permanent!" Murdock flared.

Under the impact of Thad Murdock's boot-toe Roughneck Larsh stirred and sat up, a look of pain and surprise on his battered features. Groggily his reddened eyes focused on Thad Murdock and for a moment held blankly. Then he recognized the other. With the recognition Larsh's expression changed from puzzled pain to savage fury. He'd felt underpaid for doing Murdock's slugging as it was. Now the other's thankless wrath and ill treatment was

the last straw. Caution vanished in a reckless surge of white-hot hate.

"Yuh'll kick me when I'm down, huh? And put a bullet in me if I don't get up and do more of yore dirty work? Well, I'll tell yuh what yuh can do. Yuh can go plumb to blazes! Get that? I'm done. I quit! I'm not scared of yuh, or yore bullets either. If you think yuh can shut me up like yuh did Jim Hatton's man that knew too much, yuh're wrong!" Larsh's hoarse rumbling voice got no further. But the thing was out, the damage done.

With a savage half-animal snarl Thad Murdock's tall frame tensed pantherlike. One hand dropped to his hip. Fingers closed talonlike about the butt of his heavy gun. There was no mistaking his intent now. Murder shone madly and evilly from his glaring eyes. Plainly he meant to silence Larsh at all odds.

The move caught the ring of onlookers unaware. But Buck Parr who was standing nearer, within the circle, acted just in time. In a leap he hurled across the space that separated himself and Murdock. Gripping the would-be killer's wrist Parr turned the weapon up and away, just as it roared deafeningly.

Both Larsh and Parr had laid aside their guns when the fight started so neither could in sudden anger resort to weapons. Little as Parr liked the hulking Larsh, he had no wish to see him shot in cold blood. Moreover from Larsh's sudden interrupted words and Murdock's furious killing rage, Parr realized that Roughneck Larsh knew the truth of the range killing that had started the feud between the outfits, and that this truth did Thad Murdock no credit!

Clutching Murdock's wrist in a tense, wary grip as they faced, Parr reached swiftly down with his free hand and secured Murdock's second gun, holstered on his crossed belts. Righting the pistol in his hand as he did, Parr released Thad Murdock's

wrist and sprang back. Eye to eye, gun to gun, the two faced.

"Try your shooting iron now on an armed man, if you're craving action!" Parr clipped out in a drawl edgy with menace.

Thad Murdock never hesitated. "You skunk! Who asked you to butt into this play anyhow? Things was going good till you got in town last night. But you've butted in anywhere for the last time. You're fin-ishing now!" His body tensed in a gunfighting crouch, shoulders sloping. His right arm rose smoothly upward and outward.

Facing Murdock, still calm and chilly cold, Buck Parr whipped his gun forward. The whole thing had been too quick for argument or interference. Suddenly then, deafening in the strained silence that gripped the onlookers, a single gun roared shattering. So close were the facing fighters and so nearly timed were their out-jutting weapons that it was not until Thad Murdock's knees began to buckle under him that the rigidly silent crowd realized that Buck Parr had fired—and that Thad Murdock was killed.

Hatton men, Murdock men and townspeople alike had stood rooted to the spot. Scarcely a full minute had passed since Roughneck Larsh crumpled to the earth and Murdock sprang forward to kick and curse him. Yet in that space Roughneck Larsh had admitted knowing the solution of the earlier range killing. And Thad Murdock, whose actions plainly showed him guilty, had died in the attempt to silence Larsh and settle his score against Buck Parr. With the killer known and Murdock dead the feud was over!

Coming from their half-daze of surprise, several of the hardest appearing of Murdock's men made a move toward their guns. But instantly old Jim Hatton and his cowmen stopped them.

"Hold it, all of yuh Murdock men! Yuh fellers are in bad enough as 'tis, shieldin' a killer and aidin' in rustlin' cattle, if I read my cards right. But start any gunplay and a hull passel of yuh're goin' to a graveyard instead of a jail!" Hatton warned grimly.

Leaderless, Thad Murdock's crowd hesitated, glanced uncertainly at one another. Then their hands went into the air.

WARNING ONCE, HE STRUCK IN THE NIGHT,
"THE GHOST RIDER," MOUNTED ON DEATH'S OWN STEED.
THEN CAME ANOTHER RIDER, DODGING THE LONG NOOSE,
AND THE RANGE WAS TOO SMALL FOR BOTH.

"TROUBLE-SHOOTER"

a complete novelette

By Eugene Cunningham

HIDDEN HANDS

By RALPH CONDON



"Don't anybody more," Monty said calmly.

The hot wind from the desert twisted up a whirlwind that danced drunkenly across the yard. Sheriff Lin Howes squinted his eyes before it and rolled a cigar between thin lips.

"So you've seen no lone fella driftin' through this way?"

Big Jim Marlin, owner of the Rio



Torcido, glanced up from the ragged little terrier at his feet to fix the lawman with a steady eye.

"That's what I told you, Howes. Who you keepin' cases on?"

The sheriff removed the smoke from his mouth and carefully dusted the ash before he said:

"I see you ain't heard. That hell-cat Monty Powers broke out of the pen—near a week ago it was."

"That so?" No change of expression marked the old cattleman's face.

"Yeah, he beat up two guards single-handed and got away clear. He's a bad one, that Powers."

"How come you to look here, Howes?" There was an edge to the old man's tone and the sheriff caught it.

"Oh, I just dropped in. This is the way he'd be apt to go if he headed back to his old place on the San Lucas."

"That's been sold for taxes," Big Jim reminded shortly.

"It has," Howes agreed and the hint of an unpleasant smile marked his face, "but I just happened to remember that the dog there used to belong to Powers and that he used to ride over this way real often to call on your girl."

As he spoke, there sounded a quick gasp and both men turned to find Nan Marlin standing in the doorway close by.

Every sign of color had drained from her face, leaving her eyes big and sharply blue by contrast. One slim, sun-tanned hand was pressed hard to her breast.

"Leave my girl out of this!" Big Jim thundered. Then in a gentler voice, "Nan, go back in the house."

Without a word the girl obeyed and Marlin turned back to Howes.

"Whether he came here in the past or not, he ain't here now! And get this, Howes: just because my girl didn't favor your style and told you so, is no reason to try dragging her name down with Powers'."

"I ain't kickin'," the lawman growled and flushed darkly. "It's all one with me if she chose the company of a killer."

Turning on his heel before Marlin could answer, he flung onto his horse, joined the posse that had been waiting below the house and rode away up the valley.

For a moment, Big Jim stood watching.

The screen door opened and shut. Nan came out to stand by her father.

"Did he say that Monty was free, Dad?"

"That's what he said. But see here, I want you to forget that fellow!"

There was silence for a bit.

The hair rose along the back of Jocoso, the little terrier. He growled deep in his throat, then sniffed the breeze, and his warning gave way to a wild yip of joy as he bounded across the yard.

"This fellow ain't forgot me," a soft voice observed, and a lean, gray-eyed youth stepped from the door of the well-house.

"Monty!" the name broke from Nan's lips in a quick eager cry.

"That's right," Powers said gravely and scratched the little dog's ears.

"So Howes was right," Marlin said slowly. "You did head this way."

Monty pulled his gaze away from the warm sympathy of Nan's eyes and swung around to face the rancher. In spite of his ragged, dusty clothes and the deep lines of weariness that marked his face, there was pride and courage in his bearing.

"I dropped in to say howdy and get my dog. I'll go along d'rectly so as not to embarrass you by being found here."

Nan turned appealingly to her father, "Oh, dad, can't you let him rest?"

"Get the Chinaman to lay out some grub," the rancher directed, and Monty saw decision forming in his eyes. When the girl was gone into the house, he said: "Where's your outfit, Powers?"

"I'm standing right in the middle of it," Monty said dryly, and shifted

his feet in their worn and scuffed shoes.

"You mean you walked clear across the desert?"

Monty's eyes flickered suddenly hard when he said:

"A man ain't so damned high above walkin' when he's been in a cage for two years!" His gaze swung around up the valley where the sheriff had gone.

Marlin grunted. "I'll let you have an unbranded horse to ride and stake you to an outfit. But see here, Powers, keep away from the Rio Torcido. I can't have my girl mixing with a man that's been sent over for murder!"

Monty appraised the rancher's face and saw there, something that took the harshness from the words.

"You can keep your horse and your advice," he said, "and you don't have call to worry none. I won't get Nan's name said with mine. Some day the truth of this thing'll spell itself out. It ought to make good reading when it does. In the meantime, you're not convinced yourself that I killed Jules Ladner and tried to burn him! You'd be offering me no horse to get away on, if you thought I was guilty."

"I know only what came out at the trial," Marlin said doggedly. "We know that Ladner was to the sheriff two days before he died, reporting your threats and asking protection."

"The whole thing was circumstantial," Monty said bitterly. "All they had was the body they found in the ashes of Ladner's cabin and the fact that I was away in the hills alone and couldn't prove it."

"It wasn't all circumstantial," Marlin said briefly. "They know it was Ladner they found all right. There was no other one-armed man with a hook anywhere in the Vantanas. If you're going to break clear on this thing, you'll have to use your head, Monty."

"If I break clear on this thing, I'll have to use guns," the boy said harshly. "There's hidden hands

blockin' me off, but I'm goin' through this time, come whatever. I'll get no other chance!"

"Food's on the table," Nan called from the doorway.

A quick light came to warm Monty's eyes as he watched the girl, but he made no move toward her.

"Thanks, Nan, but I'll go along now. I—"

"You ain't going no place, Powers!"

Lin Howes's voice was heavy with menace as he came around the end of the patio wall. He held a forty-five ready in his right hand, in his left gleamed a pair of handcuffs.

"Figured you was mistook about his being here," he said meaningly, "so I dropped down over the river bank and come back while the boys raised a dust over the hill."

"By hell, I didn't know!" Big Jim thundered.

"No, I reckon not," the lawman said and laughed unpleasantly.

"He's speakin' the truth," Monty said dryly, "but it ain't a thing you'd be apt to recognize."

With an oath, Howes' hand shot out to fasten the cuffs on the boy's wrist.

There was a high-pitched shriek of rage and a ball of bristling fur flung through the air. The sheriff dropped his shackles with a cry of pain as Jocoso's teeth slashed his wrist.

At the same instant, Monty Power's fist lashed out like a streak of light in a grievous blow to the jaw. The impact jerked the lawman's boots free of the earth, and when his shoulders struck the dirt his joints were loose like a dropped puppet.

"Thanks, little dog," Monty said, and picked up Howes' gun.

"You're a fool, Powers," Marlin rumbled. "They'll hunt you down like a lobo wolf after this!"

"You don't make a case like mine any worse than she is," Monty's tone was flatly cold, "and that jape should have been smashed before."

The girl, Nan, came swiftly across

the yard toward him. Monty saw Marlin's eyes darken, but she would not be stopped. It was as though she had forgotten her father when she stood before him and laid her strong brown hands on his arm.

"Don't let me hear you say that again, Monty—that it can't be made worse. It's enough that we have to fight outside enemies, without you be licked by bitterness."

Monty braced himself against the thing he read in her eyes. There was strength and courage there and something else, for him alone. But he struck it down, refused to see it or admit to himself that she had used the word "we."

"I ain't licked, and bitterness went when I made up my mind to leave that man-cage and come home. It's only that there'll be no half rode trails ahead. Sooner or later, I'll bust this thing wide open and sort me out a clean name—or I'll shoot the works trying, and there'll be nothing to take back and lock up that won't spoil! Either way, though, won't see me licked."

He forced a harshness into his voice, made it cold and impersonal. He saw the quick hurt in her eyes, and turned his own away so that she might not see the thing there, which he knew he could not hide.

Marlin went to look down at the inert sheriff.

"You could have hit him half as hard and stilled him," he said dryly.

"It may break him of this handcuff idea," Monty said bluntly.

"A smack like that ought to break something," the rancher agreed, "and I guess we'll just let him sleep. His jaw ain't apt to be no comfort to him when he wakes. That horse and outfit offer still stands, Monty."

"Thanks," the boy declined, "but I'll just gather up the sheriff's rig. That big white horse of his ought to serve fine and I reckon there's grub and blankets on the saddle."

"Have it your way," Big Jim

grunted. "You won't make it any thicker that way, I guess."

"I'm obliged just the same," Monty said. "Thanks for keeping Jocoso, Nan."

"I was glad to—Monty."

He heard the little catch to her voice and turned swiftly away. The sheriff's horse was down by the stream in the willows, and a moment later, with the little dog under his arm, he was loping away on the trail to the San Lucas.

Only once did he look back, but then he saw an arm raised for an instant in salute by the patio gate.

When Monty came out on the pine ridge two miles above the Rio Torcido, he saw three men of Lin Howe's posse a thousand yards ahead of him. They were moving at an easy gait and they drew up to wait when they saw the sheriff's big white horse come out on the summit.

Without a second's hesitation, Monty rose in the saddle and motioned them to return. When they had started toward him, he wheeled about, dropped back over the ridge and sought a hiding place in the pine thickets.

Five minutes later, the excited posse thundered by and an owlish smile puckered the fugitive's face. "Lin'll sure praise 'em high for their shrewdness, Jocoso, old son," he said. When they were safely gone he struck out once more toward the San Lucas.

It was eleven miles of rough going that lay ahead, and the last of the twilight had faded to the soft of star-domed evening when Monty crossed the last ridge above his old ranch.

A shadowed streak along the bottoms marked the willows where the frogs held chorus. Blended close to these trees by the warm darkness were the buildings that had been Monty's home.

In the hills to the south, a coyote started a madhouse bark and ended with a long shivered wail. Another

answered from far off and the two raised their weird voices together.

"It all listens the same," Monty breathed. "The coyotes are as frivolous as ever and the frogs still hold meeting down in the willow brakes. It'd be good to stay for a spell, pup, and soak up some restfulness. But it ain't to be. We'll have to gather our eggs, have a look and be long gone come morning—but later, we'll come back."

A moment after, the outlines of the buildings showed in the night. Monty swung down and then froze in his tracks as his nostrils caught the scent of a home-rolled smoke.

"You've been a long time coming and my belly's burned up for a drink." The red eye of a cigarette marked the speaker sitting by the cabin door.

Monty still held Jocoso under his arm. His right hand dropped to the butt of Lin Howes' gun. He shifted a little so that his figure might not stand out against the white of the horse.

The man by the door took a last suck at his smoke and snapped it away. It cut a winking ark that ended in a tiny explosion of sparks.

"You'll have to be getting another Mex to dig if we keep on here. That greaser fool thought I was drunk along about dark and made a break for it. He got as far as the creek before I let him have it."

Monty stiffened as the speaker rose.

"There's a chance we won't need anybody. That last stuff didn't rate so high . . . Say, who the hell—?"

"Hold it," Monty snapped, but the crashing flame of a gun and the suck of a bullet by his neck drowned his words. He flung himself down and wide and fired twice under the flash of the other man's gun.

The sheriff's horse gave a great shuddering groan and pitched down.

For a long moment there was dead quiet. The frogs along the stream made no single sound and even the

coyotes on the distant hills were stilled.

Monty held Jocoso hard to the ground with his left hand and waited.

After a time, the frogs started singing again down by the stream. First one and then another joining in until the whole chorus was going once more.

Jocoso whined softly and Monty let go his grip.

"I reckon we're alone again," he said, and rose.

It was scarcely necessary to feel the stiffening gun-hand of the man by the cabin, to know that there was no farther menace here.

The face that showed in the brief flare of Monty's cupped match was carved in the lines of vicious brutality, and death had lent it no softening mark.

"So," the boy said softly, "you were expecting someone and thought that I—now I wonder . . ."

He stood a moment in thought, and the hair tingled along the back of his neck as he remembered the man's words and the ominous suggestion they brought to his mind.

"By thunder," he said suddenly, "maybe the answer to our riddle is right here on the San Lucas! But we'll have to move fast. Howes and his merry men won't be far behind."

Jocoso followed his master into the cabin. A match showed a candle on a dirty block of wood and Monty held the flame to it. By the flickering yellow light, he surveyed the room.

The filth of careless living was thick upon the place. The few dishes and utensils lay unwashed over the table and stove. The floor that Monty had kept speckless was a mass of dirt and cigarette stubs.

The breath hissed through the young man's nostrils as he crossed to the heavy built-in bunk. In cold fury, he ripped away the mattress and stamped out the double boards that made the side of the bed.

A rusted tobacco can rattled out and he picked it up, thumbed back the

lid and shook out the matted roll of bills that was inside. The musty odor of mildew was in the air as he checked over the money.

"There was a hundred and ten," he muttered; "that ought to be some help to a man that's on the dodge."

He put the bills in his pocket and went across the room, put out the candle. With the little dog close at his heels, he made his way down the hill toward the barn.

He heard the dead man's horse stamping in the corral. The sky was showing light to the east from a rising moon, and he knew that by its illumination he could make his survey of the ranch. In the meantime, he must saddle the horse in the corral to take the place of the one which had been shot down.

A saddle, bridle and rope hung over the fence by the gate. He took the rope and went inside. The horse, a dark blur in the night, snorted and moved away. Monty stopped and spoke reassuringly, waited until he made out that the animal had turned to face him, then went on again. A moment later, he had his hand on the animal's soft muzzle and slipped the rope around its neck.

The moon came up huge and red to silhouette the pines along the ridges as he was saddling up. At sight of it, a half dozen scattered coyotes raised their yammering wails.

Then abruptly, as though by a single action, the frogs down by the creek broke off their song and Jocoso growled deep in his throat.

Monty stiffened to the sudden silence.

Long moments dragged by. The horse stamped its feet and rolled the bit noisily with its tongue. The coyotes finished their first wild salute of the moon and went about their nocturnal business with only an occasional swift-tempoed yapping.

Still the frogs down by the stream were silent.

And then Monty heard the thing that had stilled them. A low moaning growl that ended in a rattling cough.

Like a shadow, Monty slipped through the corral fence and into the dark under the cottonwoods. He was closer to the stream there and the sound came plainer than before.

The moonlight struck through the willows and gleamed on a patch of water between the trees. Monty held the gun ready and waited.

The sound came again, and with it memory clicked to the words of the man lying dead before the cabin:

"He got as far as the creek before I let him have it!"

This was the Mexican then, and he still lived.

Monty went swiftly down the slope to the stream. The body of a man lay pitched on its face in the edge of the water, a splash of moonlight cut through to mark it out. It was a dead weight when Monty picked it up and brought it to dry ground.

It was a Mexican of middle years, lean and haggard, clad in clothes that were little more than rags. He had been shot through both lungs and suffered a terrific loss of blood. The end was not far off.

With a bandana, Monty bathed his face and eyes, made him as comfortable as possible.

"You poor devil," he said softly, "you got bogged down in some mighty hard company."

"*Si, señor,*" the man agreed in a thick whisper, "the devil himself could be no worse."

"Take it easy, old-timer," Monty said. "Lie still and don't try to talk."

"A few moments and a few words are all that are left to me, *señor,*" the Mexican said resignedly. "Tell me, my friend, who are you? It is not like the men of Lin Howes to make one's last moments comfortable."

Monty sucked in his breath with a sharp hiss of excitement. "You work for Lin Howes?"

"Better to say, slave for Lin Howes, and that devil, Ernie Sharp, who has

fulfilled a thousand promises and killed me at last."

"Listen," Monty said, tense with eagerness. "What's going on here at this ranch? What are these men doing?"

The Mexican closed his eyes, and for a moment Monty thought that he was dead. When he spoke, it was with great effort, and his voice was fading fast. "It is the mine, señor, the ancient Esquelto mine that drives into the earth from within the barn yonder. Long ago I was taken to jail—a matter of some cows that were another's, señor—from there I was brought here. For two years I have labored at the point of a gun. Death is no misfortune to me, my friend."

"Inside my barn?" Monty cried, his mind running like mad, remembering the unexplainably large pile of earth that seemed to have been taken from the hillside in the building of the barn that had been tumbled with age when he had bought the place from the state for taxes.

"*Si, señor*, the richest of all the pocket mines that were abandoned by my people with the coming of the gringoes. But who are you, that you say, my barn?"

"I'm Powers, Monty Powers. I used to own this place."

A look of disbelief showed in the dimming eyes of the peon.

"Why do you try to deceive a dying man, señor? This Monty Powers is rotting his life away in prison for a crime he did not commit. Many times I have heard Howes and Sharp and the others of this wolf pack laugh over it."

"Listen," Monty cried, and lifted the man's head in his arms, "I am Powers! I broke out and I've just gunned the man that shot you, he's dead by the cabin. Tell me quick! What do you know about my being sent to prison?"

"It was a trick sent you there, señor, that much I know from what I have heard them say. They knew of this mine and planned it so—I—"

his words were choked off with coughing and his lips grew dark with blood.

"Who killed Jules Ladner?"

The Mexican's eyes were closed, but he forced himself to speak:

"Ladner? Jules Ladner? Señor, but listen. My cousin, Lorenzo, and I were kept in the same cell. I believe it was from him that they learned of this mine. Lorenzo was a wild one, God rest his soul. But however that may be, on the night that this killing took place and the cabin of Jules Ladner was burned, my cousin was taken from our cell—and he never came back. Never—do you understand, señor?"

"My God!" Monty cried, "you mean—?"

The peon's head dropped back, but his lips were still moving, and Monty bent low to catch his words.

"Move carefully, señor. Look beyond Howes . . . go watchfully in . . . Steptoe . . . Look at the Golden Eagle. . . . the strangled whisper trailed off into silence. The body jerked and was still.

Monty laid him down and rose, stood for a time fitting together the things that he had learned.

"So," he mused, "that's the story, then. An old Spanish pocket mine, and they framed me instead of killing me because they were afraid I might have willed the place to someone. The Mexican was trying to tell me something—Steptoe and a Golden Eagle. I guess we'll have to go look!"

His thoughts were broken into by Jocoso's growl, and a second later he heard horses' hoofs drumming in the night.

At a run he went up the hill and brought the horse down into the shadow of the cottonwoods by the creek. Then he went back up and circled wide around the yard in front of the cabin.

The night riders were slamming

down the hill in a shower of gravel as he dropped into the shelter of a great boulder. He could hear the squeak of saddle leather and the blowing of horses. The flat white of the moonlight showed that there were three men in the party.

There was a snarled oath when they sighted the sheriff's horse lying big and grotesque before the cabin. The three flung out of their saddles on the side toward Monty and kept their horses between them and the shack.

"Hey, Sharp?"

Monty saw the gleam of drawn guns.

"There's somebody lying on the other side of the horse," one of the men said. "Maybe it's Powers."

"Don't be a damn fool," another snapped. "If that was Powers, Sharp would answer. There's been hell to pay here!"

"Well, by God, let's not stand here gassing," the third growled. "We've got to find Powers and quiet him. If he's got the Mexican to talk and gets to town before the boys have cleared out with the stuff, there'll be a whole lot more hell to pay!"

"Take a look in the cabin," one of the men advised.

"What the hell you trying to do, pair me with Sharp?" the last speaker said, and swore viciously.

And at that moment, the horse down by the creek nickered!

There was a breathless silence, and then one of the men said in a voice that could not have been heard at the cabin:

"He's got Sharp's horse down there. He ain't with him or he'd have held his nose. We've got to get that horse or we're done. Ours are all blown!"

"You'll just stay solid where you are!" Monty said flatly.

And the man who had spoken last, fired at the sound of his voice.

The shot was so close that Monty felt the hiss of the lead and the roar drowned the crash of his own gun.

The man flung backward against his horse and flopped down as the animal reared and plunged away.

The other animals broke in panic, and one of the men sprang cursing after them.

Monty fired again, and the second gun, that had been flaming at him, dropped with its owner sprawled across it.

The man who had gone after the horses shifted his course and made a dash for the cabin, his legs driving like pistons.

"Halt!" Monty barked. When the runner paid him no heed, he dropped him down in the dirt with a single shot. The legs drove on futilely for a second even after he was down, then they went slack and there was silence again on the San Lucas. Silence except for the fading drum of the horses that were headed home.

Monty ran rueful fingers over the scorching bullet welt on his left forearm and moved across to take the gunbelt from the first of the fallen men. The calibre was the same, and he reloaded his own gun.

"My luck seems to be holding so far," he observed grimly, "but a mine and some buzzard bait ain't going to be enough to clear me 'less I can hook this up with that Lin Howes jape. I reckon we better be moving, dog."

The town of Steptoe lay twenty miles away, straight through the broken reaches of the Vantanas. Monty had ridden the trail before, and when he came out on the rim of the canyon above it the next morning, it was only just seven o'clock.

"Jocoso, old son," Monty said wearily, "if I'd known our trail was going to twist this way, I'd have left you on the Rio Torcido, but we'll have to play 'em the way they fall. Most of the people that knew the truth about Jules Ladner are dead. But Howes knows, so there's only one thing to do. Find where he is, watch him till he leaves town and pick him

up somewhere out on the trail. And I'll just bet we can make him talk."

The look that was in Monty's eyes as he rode down the hill, was not a pleasant thing to see.

He pulled his hat low over his face and kept his tired horse at a steady jog-trot straight down the main street. He watched both sides of the thoroughfare with eyes that were mere smoldering gray slits. His breath hissed with sudden eagerness when he made out on the front of a building, the words, GOLDEN EAGLE LAND AND CATTLE CO.

At the end of the street was a livery stable, and he rode boldly in.

"Stall this horse and feed him well," he said briefly, "and let my dog sleep in the hay close by." He ordered Jocoso to stay and went out and down the street toward the Golden Eagle Land and Cattle Co. He moved lightly on the balls of his feet, and the hunger for battle was strong upon him.

"Maybe I'll drift right in," he decided, "and pull the place to pieces to see what I can find. I don't reckon they're looking for me yet."

His destination was just ahead and across the street when he heard horsemen coming behind him. He judged there to be three or four, but he did not look around.

Then a restaurant door opened a quarter of a block ahead of him, and two men came out. They came directly toward him, and unless he changed his course he must come face to face with them. And it seemed to Monty that there was something vaguely familiar about them.

The screen door of a barber shop was close at hand, and he shoved it open and went in watchfully. But the barber was a stranger and alone and gave Monty no more heed than he would any customer.

"Shave," Monty said, sprawling down in the one chair.

"Goin' to be hot," the man observed.

"Fire'd go like the devil in weather like this," the barber reasoned. With one hand he laid on the lather, with the other he fought a persistent fly.

The door opened and two men came in.

"Howdy," the barber said. "Sit down, gents."

When the men answered the greeting, Monty knew they were the two that he had come into the shop to avoid, and he knew, too, why they had seemed familiar. They were Jim and Hal Jessup from the Frying Pan spread; he had met them both at round-ups in years gone by.

From their talk now he learned that they were on their way home from a big inter-ranch cattle drive.

The barber worked swiftly with blade and brush.

Once more the screen door opened and another man came in.

"Your hair'll be keepin' you warm be the time Percy gets to you, Dutch," Hal Jessup said, and Monty knew that this was Dutch Meyers, wagon boss of the Circle C.

"Sure," Meyers said, "it'll be as long as the hair on them critters you gents drove through. And how'd the drive go?"

"Fair to middlin'," Jim Jessup averred. "What's the news from the barren end of the range?"

"I guess," Meyers said, "that there ain't nothing you boys ain't heard 'less it's the new rabbit law." He rolled a thoughtful smoke.

"Rabbit law?"

"Yeah, jack rabbit."

"What law would that be?" Hal Jessup demanded.

Dutch lighted the smoke he had rolled and jerked his head. "Why, it's just that nobody can shoot 'em any more."

"And why the hell not?" the Jessup boys demanded together.

"It's the ears," Dutch said patiently. "it's because of the ears."

"What's ears got to do with shooting rabbits?" Jim demanded.

The barber paused in his work to

listen. Monty found himself suppressing a smile beneath the lather in spite of his precarious position.

"Well," Dutch drawled, "you see them big ears makes 'em look so much like Frying Pan riders, that folks is afraid there'll be an accident!"

The barber guffawed.

The Jessups sat a moment in silence, then swiftly they moved together along the bench and Dutch Meyers was jolted off the end onto the floor. He got up and went around to the other end.

After a moment Hal said:

"What other news you got, Dutch?"

"Well," Meyers said, "they tell me Monty Powers busted out of the pen."

"That straight?"

"As far as I know."

For a moment there was thoughtful silence. The only sound was the scraping of the razor on Monty's jaw.

"I'm glad to hear it," Jim said at last.

"Me, too," Hal agreed. "You knew him right well, didn't you, Dutch?"

"I did," Meyers admitted, and Monty felt a sudden warmth when he added, "and they never made me believe he murdered Ladner and burned his body in the cabin. That was never Monty's way."

The barber finished with the razor and laid a hot towel across Monty's face.

"There's Howes across the street talking to Voss right now," Hal Jessup said. "He'll be some stewed up over this thing."

Monty twisted his head a little so that he might see some part of what went on in the street. He heard horses' hoofs and saw the sheriff step out from the front of the Golden Eagle Land and Cattle Co. to stop three riders.

After Howes had spoken briefly to the men, they turned around and rode back the way they had come at a gallop.

"Bar Two riders," Jim Jessup said. "Now I wonder what he was telling them."

"You'll know real sudden," Dutch said. "He's headed this way."

Monty straightened his head. He heard the scuff of boots and the door squeaked open to admit two men.

"Here, you fellows," Howes said harshly. "I want to deputize the bunch of you and I want you to ride quick!"

Dutch Meyer's voice was softly lazy:

"Put a name to it, sheriff."

"That killer Monty Powers is loose," Howes snapped. "That's the name of it. I'm going to deputize every able man and comb the hills for him. He's blood crazy and as dangerous as a rattler!"

For a moment there was no word said. The barber stood listening, the towel remained across the lower half of Monty's face.

"You take me now," Dutch said evenly, "I'll just have to ask off, sheriff. I don't somehow hanker to go."

"You'll go, damn it," Howes rasped, "or you'll regret it!"

"It's a mighty poor citizen that won't back the law!" the man Voss said bluntly. The sound of his voice did something to Monty Powers, stirred the shadows of his memory.

"I might some day come to ask your opinion," Meyers told Voss dryly. "When I do, I'll sure beg your pardon for telling you to mind your own damn business now!"

The man started a snarled retort, but the sheriff cut him off.

"It's his business all right. Until this thing is over, I've made him my chief deputy. Get up and come along now. That goes for you in the chair there—"

At that moment, Jocoso, who had tired of waiting his master's return and so tracked him down, came to scratch on the barber shop door.

"By God," the sheriff's voice held the sudden ring of panic. "There's his dog now!"

Voss, who stood nearest the door, kicked it open, and Jocoso bounded in and across the floor to stand with his feet against the barber's chair.

"All right," Monty said softly, "don't anybody move. I've got you covered from under this bib." He sat up and the towel fell away from his face.

"Howdy, fella," Meyers grinned.

"Excuse this gun business," Monty told him, "but I can't slide off into any chances. There's nothing personal in it for you and the Jessup boys, the barber either if he watches himself."

"My gun's stuck in the leather," Meyers said. "I couldn't draw it if I wanted to. Jim and Hal are havin' the same trouble."

"That's right," Jim agreed. "There ain't a thing we could do."

"Damn you, you'll suffer for aiding a criminal," Howes snarled.

"They ain't aiding any at all," Monty said, "you've got the same chance to draw that they have. And, brother, don't think I miss your play—trying to get every able-bodied rider out of town so there'd be nobody to take up your trail if I got here and kicked the lid off what kind of a skunk you are!"

He turned to the white-faced Voss, noted the dapper coat and creased trousers, the polished boots, speckless buckskin gloves and the expensive cigar clamped in the right hand. "There's something about you," he said softly, "and any minute now it'll come to me. In the meantime, we'll drift across the street and you and Howes can show me around the offices of the *Golden Eagle*!"

Voss and the sheriff started for the door under the direction of Monty's gun.

"I wonder," he said to the other men, "if you might stay here for a time?"

"I'd be too scared to move for a long time to come," Dutch said, and his left eyelid flickered, "and I reckon Percy would stay if we asked him."

"Swell," Monty said, and then to the men before him, "I'll be right behind you japes and I want you to act natural—if you don't, I've got nothing to lose . . ."

Howes' face was flushed with rage, but Monty saw a thing there that quickened his pulse. That thing was fear.

Voss' face was dead white and he licked his lips repeatedly. He still held his cigar clamped between the fingers of his right hand.

The two started across the street and Monty went through the door after them.

"Monty!"

He sucked in his breath with a hiss of surprise. Nan Marlin stood close to the wall beside the barber shop door, and half concealed in her hand was a vicious, short-barreled revolver.

"Nan, what—?"

"Never mind, don't talk now," she said breathlessly. "I'll keep them covered while you take my horse and get away. Go across the border and wait—" her voice dropped to a whisper and she stepped close. "I've learned something about the sheriff. I'll start an investigation and send for you when your name is cleared."

"Listen," Monty started, then stopped, a puzzled frown on his face. "Hold it, you two!" he snapped to the men before him.

Howes stood tensely, hands wide of his sides and clear of his gun.

Voss' left thumb was hooked over the pocket of his coat, his right was straight down and the morning breeze was blowing from it, a yellowish curl of smoke.

For a long, breathless moment, Monty stood watching, and the girl's eyes followed his gaze to the cigar that had burned down to set smoldering fire to the buckskin glove.

Nan's hand streaked to her mouth to half stifle her scream:

"Monty! He doesn't feel it! Don't

you see? He can't feel it. He's Jules Ladner!"

With a hideous snarl the man spun around. He made no move toward the gun that hung at his left thigh, but his right hand whipped up to a point and the crack of a small calibre gun spat from the palm of his artificial hand.

The lead jerked at Monty's shoulder to spoil his aim as his own gun streaked up.

Lin Howes went into action as Voss sprang away down the street. But his first shot was wild with haste, and Monty's bullet cut him down before he could try again.

Monty felt the numbness spreading from his shoulder through his body, found himself somehow on his knees. The lagging slowness of raising his gun seemed like a dreadful endless nightmare. Voss was but a stride from a saddled horse when he fought the trigger back.

The shot tore the gun from his hands, but with the effort his head cleared and the first shock of Voss' bullet passed. He saw Dutch Meyers cross over to kick the gun from Lin Howes' dead hand, pass on to Voss, who lay sprawled on his back.

People were running into the street, their excited cries mixing with the pounding of feet.

Then Nan's arms were around him and the Jessup boys came to help her raise him. Without a word being said, as though they knew without doubt where he wanted to go, they helped him over to the dying Voss.

"So," he said simply, looking down, "you killed a Mexican by the name of Lorenzo, cut his hand off and put your old hook on him before you burned him. Now at last I've done the thing I've already spent two years for doing."

The man opened his eyes, eyes that

were swiftly shadowing with death. "That's right. I'm Ladner—but it took a hell-cat woman to recognize me!" He started to laugh, but it stuck in his throat as he died.

"I guess plenty of people heard that," Monty said wearily. Supported by Nan and Dutch, and followed by the little dog, he went down the street to the doctor's, where his shoulder was dressed and bandaged.

While this was being done, he told how he had gone for his old money cache on the San Lucas and what had happened there.

"But I'd like to know," he demanded of Nan, "is how you knew Howes was mixed in this thing?"

"I was in the saddlehouse when his posse came back to the Rio Torcido," she said simply. "I heard him tell them to stop you at any cost before you got to the San Lucas. He said he'd go to town and be ready to hit the trail with the loot, in case you slipped through their fingers and found out the truth. He said he'd wait to hear from them until eight this morning, then he'd go."

"And how'd you get here?" Monty asked softly.

"I told dad I was coming to see friends, and saddled at daylight."

"And you're telling me you came to spy on that coyote alone?"

"Of course. He wouldn't suspect a woman, and I was afraid that if he got away without our knowing which trail he took, we'd never be able to catch him!"

This time, Monty did not ignore her use of the word, *we*, and neither did he resist the thing he read in her eyes.

An owlish grin spread across Dutch Meyer's face. "You take me now," he said, "I reckon I'll go along." But nobody heard him but the little dog, Jocoso, who wagged his stump tail in agreement.

Missing Page

RANGE

COMPLETE
NOVELETTE

By J. E. GRINSTEAD

*The Devil's Own Sowed the Seeds of Hell on That Range, But
the Crops Withered When They Tried to Make High and Short
Some of Their Fruit—Especially of the Long Limb.*



in hell with a empty canteen. I hears of a job at this Rafter 6, and heads for it. We was on the trail three days before you gets sober enough to talk, and now—"

"Yes," jeered High, "if you hadn't lost our money playin' poker agin a stacked deck, we'd still be in Billings, and I'd still be drunk and natural. Gamblin' is the worst habit—"

"Hiram, son," said Short, mournfully, "let's not waste time in crimmynashuns and recrimmynashuns. We are in a bad section—"

Wham! A bullet whined low over their heads, and a little wreath of blue smoke rose from a thicket a hundred yards ahead of them. The two drifters jumped their horses into a little wash behind another thicket.

"Now look what you done," said High. "Don't you know you can't use words like them, in cow country, and not start gunstuff. I don't blame that gent for starting a smoke, but if he does it again I aim to kill him. He—listen!"

"Hey, Tex, did you get one?" came a voice from the other side of the smoking thicket.

"Dunno, Jim," Tex replied. "They ducked behind that other thicket, but maybe we can smoke 'em out. Just a pair of nesters. One of 'em has got on a hard-boiled hat, and the other one looks like he—"

"Now see what you done," Short growled in a low tone. "I tried to keep you from trading hats with that bartender, when you was drunk. You look just like—"

"I don't give a damn what I look like," snapped High. "Can't no lousy Western waddy accuse me of being a nester. I aim to call that gent all to pieces."

Before Short could stop him, High jumped his horse into the open. That gun in the thicket spat viciously again, and the hard-boiled hat went from High's head.

"Hold the deal, Tex!" yelled Jim

Guy, who had joined Tex in the thicket. "That ain't no nester. He's a human cowhand."

"You know dang well I'm a cowhand," declared High, "and the next gent that opens on me gets shot up like a tin sign at the edge of town. I don't aim—"

"Hold on, pardner," called Jim Guy. "That hat of yo'n was right misleading. How comes you wearin' a helmet like that? I never seen one on anything but a Siwash Squaw, before."

"Never mind that helmet," said High. "Do you gents want to smoke a pipe of peace, or smoke your guns?"

"We're friendly with cowhands," grinned Guy, "and you look plumb natural without that pasteboard bonnet."

"Come on out, Short," called High. "These gents is friendly and human."

The four of them rode out into the open and looked one another over.

"My name is Jim Guy," said one of the two gunners, "and this is Tex Nolan. Who are you fellers, and what for?"

"Why, we are just a couple cowhands, named High and Short," drawled Old Short. "We are in Billings and broke. We hear there is a chance for a job on the Rafter 6 and heads out to hunt for it, but we finds Strange Range, and can't get located."

"Huh," grunted Jim Guy. "Think it's Strange Range, do you?"

"Shore do," said Short. "Any range is strange, where gents hides up in the bushes and shoots at pilgrims because they wear a hat that's fried on both sides."

"Yes, I reck'n it is," returned Guy, in a musing tone, "but you ain't saw nothin'. Do you two drifters know which end of a cow the horns grow on?"

"You bet yo' damn neck we do," spat High, who was still a little bit peeved about their reception on the Rafter 6 range. "Also, we knows which end of a gun busts into gorgeous blossom of fire and smoke,

when the trigger is pulled accidental. Next time I hear lead whine, I aim to pull mine a purpose."

"Well, now," said Guy, "I done told you that Tex fired them shots plumb accidental and unintentional, thinking you was nesters, account of that tin cap. That was an apology, and one is enough. I happen to be boss of the Rafter 6 spread, and I need some hands. If you two Texas road-runners want a job, I'll take you on. If you are real hands, I'll keep you. If you ain't—somebody'll bury you before long."

"Just one little minute of yo' valuable time, Mister Guy," said High, his glistening black eyes fixed on Jim Guy as unblinkingly as if he were not bareheaded in that blazing Montana sun. "What do you want hands for? Need men to prod cows and nurse little calves, and pay by the month, or do you want head-hunters, and pay by the scalp? Eloccidate some, please. Also, I'd like to know if the state pays a bounty on the scalps of driftin' waddies that gets caught on this Rafter 6 range."

"Well," grinned Jim Guy, "I reck'n you are entitled to know the lay of things. The Rafter 6 is a cow ranch, but right now it is in a three-cornered mess. The old Six was here first, and got along all right for a few years. It's just a plain, natural cow ranch, with headquarters in on Soldier Creek, ten mile west of here. Coupla years ago, Dorsey Bone builds a cabin on the head draws of Soldier Creek, and locates the D B Bar. That just makes natural trouble over water, grass, and the prior rights of discovery. It would all been settled by now, for we was getting the best of every ruckus we had, and Dorsey was about ready to holler calf rope, and quit. Then he turns fox. There's a stretch of pretty good farm land in the Soldier Creek valley, about half way between the two ranches. We have done convinced Dorse that he can't graze that valley, so he brings in a lot of nesters, settles 'em in the

valley, and starts 'em to plowin' up the grass, just like—"

"What!" High snorted. "Plowin' up grass that God intended for cows and calves to eat. And—and this Tex gent thought I was one of 'em. Where'd you get yo' name, podner? No Texan ever mistaken a cowhand for a nester."

"It was that sun-dried hat," said Tex. "I know you are a cowhand, now that I can see you, and hear the noise you make with your mouth."

"All right. That squares it. Tell us the rest of yo' bedtime story, Mister Guy."

Well, we gathers our beef this spring and throws 'em on the good grass in the valley, like always. Naturally they tramps some of the little patches that's been plowed up, and when they did a plumb pestilence breaks out on the Rafter 6 range. We goes to finding range horse stock dead at the water-holes, and cows and little calves that didn't die natural. On top of that, our beef herd gets stampeded and scattered from hell to Halifax. Every time we get a few steers together, they gets stampeded in the night time. Them nesters just rides us ragged."

"Shore it's the nesters?" asked High.

"No, I ain't. We never have ketched 'em, but they ain't nobody else, except maybe the D B Bar, and they don't work like natural cowhands."

"Why don't you just up and clean that dang nester outfit off'n the range?" asked Short.

"Can't do it. They's some women, and a few children in the nester settlement. My hands won't jump an outfit that's got any females in it. They are so dang particular that way that they'll hardly drive cows and heifers to market."

"I see," High said, with a grin. "How many of them he nesters are they?"

"Only twelve, but they are stayers.

We have had three big runs lately, and we know we killed and crippled some of 'em, but they's still twelve men there, and no cripples. That makes us just know that the D B Bar is doing the work, and using the nesters for a blind."

"Might be," said Short, "but is the D B Bar shy any hands, after these fights?"

"Not that we can find out, but we know they are bound to be in on the deal, because they ain't nobody else."

"That sounds natural," drawled Short. "It don't look to me like the Rafter 6 spread is safe company for a pair of saddle-tramps that don't know the range. High and me needs a job, but we wouldn't be worth much until we learns the range. Could you fix it so yo' hands wouldn't shoot at pasteboard bonnets and the like, until we can look around a little, and find some of the water-holes?"

Jim Guy was a good cowman, and he was not a fool. He was looking square into Old Short's big gray eyes, and he read something there that made him say:

"Yes, I could do that, but you said you fellers were broke, and you'll have to eat while you are getting located on the Rafter 6 range."

"Yes, we'd like to eat occasional. You might could loan us about fifty dollars, and take it out of our pay when we learn the range, and go to work for you."

"All right," said Guy, passing over two twenties and a ten.

"Thanks," said Short. "Now this little hamlet, Hennepin, where a feller can get a clean shirt, some groceries, a few drinks and a poker or two. Where is it?"

"Eight miles, straight ahead on this trail," said Guy. "The Rafter 6 is five mile up Soldier Creek from Hennepin. The D B Bar is ten mile above the Six, and that nester settlement is about half way between the two ranches. You have seen the country to the east of here. About ten mile

west of Soldier Creek it runs into foothills and badlands."

"Them's a good description of the country," said Short. "Now, High and me aims to ride for Hennepin, but we don't want yo' company none. Bein' from Texas, we are sorta timid and afraid away out here in the West, and it looks dangerous to ride with you. Of course you know yo' business, but yo' best bet is to quit hunting nesters, where there ain't any, and go to gathering steers. If you get a herd together, High and me will help you hold 'em, if we are close enough."

High leaned from his saddle and picked up his helmet. He set it jauntily on his head, and the two drifters jogged away down the Hennepin trail.

CHAPTER II

HIGH AND SHORT RIDE

"I'll bet you a month's pay agin fifty, that you lose the fifty you loaned them two tramps," said Tex Nolan, who was a lank, rangy puncher, and the best rider and fastest gunner in the Rafter 6 spread. "They'll get plenty of action on that money when they get to Hennepin."

"I'm not placing any more bets today," said Jim Guy. "I'm backin' them two drifters to win something. Let's ride for the ranch, and join the spread."

Jim and Tex took a trail that led straight across the country to the Rafter 6. High and Short had ridden a mile, when High said:

"Short, they's places where they put men in jail for getting money under false pretenses. I got an idea that when this Jim Guy finds out that we drunk up and poked away them fifty, he goes in to make this that kind of country."

"Nope," growled Short. "We didn't pretend nor promise nothing to nobody. Besides that, we don't drink up and poker away these fifty. When we gets to Hennepin, we takes one

drink per each, and we both gets pie-eyed on that drink. It won't make you so drunk you ain't got sense enough to follow me, and that's all you got to do."

"That's a plenty," grinned High. "Follerin' a damn fool is job enough for any man, but we got to eat. Where do you aim for me to follow you to?"

"Dunno," said Short, "but it won't be no worse than being broke in Billings. We are just following the moving finger of fate, and taking a chance."

"All right," chuckled High, filled with the glee at a chance for adventure. "Let's spur up and see what's around the bend of the trail. Try to bend that finger towards some grub and a drink or two, as soon as you can."

High and Short had no idea what they were riding into, and didn't care. Their home was where their hats were, even if one of them was a sun-dried helmet. Jim Guy didn't know that he had turned two ferrets loose among the rats on his Strange Range. Guy was a good cowman. He knew enough about men to be sure that the two drifters were not just what they appeared to be. He couldn't solve the problem of his range troubles, and he was gambling on them. Being strangers, they might find out something. High's riding right out into the open in the face of Tex Nolan's gun, made it plain enough that these two saddle-tramps were not as timid and afraid as Short had said they were.

The little old cowtown in a bend of Soldier Creek consisted of one general store, two saloons, a dance hall, and a few other shacks, including a restaurant where the customer took his life in his own hands when he ate the food. It was about noon when High and Short dismounted in front of the restaurant, and entered. They ate enough ham and eggs, questionable bread and coffee to hold them together for a while. Then they went out and entered the saloon next

door. There were several horses standing in the street, but not a Rafter 6 among them.

It may have been something that the partners ate. At any rate, when they entered that saloon they were walking tangle-legged, and looking glassy-eyed. They approached the bar, and Short ordered drinks with a thick and twisted tongue. He fished a half dollar out of his pocket, and dropped it in the sawdust. He finally recovered it, wiped it off, and laid it on the bar with a silly grin:

"'Sall ri' now, podner," he leered at the bartender. "Noth — noth'n on it 'cept the eagle and the ladish head. Here's hopin', podner."

High bolted his drink with gusto. Short tried his, but it wouldn't stay down. He spat it in the sawdust in front of the bar. Then he made half a dozen efforts to pick up his quarter change, finally got it and dropped it into his pocket. They turned away from the bar, staggered across the big room and dropped into two chairs against the wall.

"You didn't follow me," growled Short, in a low tone.

"I don't foller no dang fool in the world when he spits out good whiskey," retorted High. "I can be just as drunk with it as you can without it."

There were half a dozen other men in the place. They stood along the bar exchanging grins and winks as the two drunks settled into their chairs and went to sleep. Somewhere on the trail they had got some ragged shirts from their saddle-rolls, and put them on. What the bartender and his customers saw was a pair of the worst looking tramps that had ever given the place their limited trade. Short, so-called because he was six foot two and looked much taller because he was very slim, sprawled in his chair, his long legs stretched out and his battered Stetson pulled over his eyes. High, who was five foot three in his boots, was curled up in his chair like

a terrier pup. That pasteboard helmet was set at a rakish angle over his left eye, and the whole world could see the bullet-hole that Tex Nolan had put in it. Both were apparently sound asleep in a minute.

Of the eight men in the saloon, the bartender knew one. The rest were total strangers to Hennepin. That one was Loss Pollard. He had been around Hennepin off and on for a year. All he ever did was gamble, and give a fairly liberal patronage to the dance hall when he was lucky. He was a handsome fellow, around thirty. He wore good clothes, and he also wore a pair of pearl-handled guns. One of the others was a red-haired, stockily built fellow, who also wore two guns, but of less ornate pattern. The other four might have been cowhands. A few minutes after High and Short went to sleep, the red-haired gentleman plucked Pollard away from the bar, and led him across the room. The only other two chairs were not more than ten feet from High and Short. Pollard glanced at them, and the other man said:

"Dead to the world. Here's the dope. The boys that's putting up for this deal are getting restless, and want the job done. That's why I come in here. I didn't know when you'd be out."

"You didn't have to bring the whole gang," said Pollard.

"I didn't," replied Red Embry. "I just brought enough to look like a little bunch of cowhands traveling through. We got to make another run, and do some real damage. I got some of the boys on the lookout, and the first time they get a little bunch together, we do our stuff."

"Huh," grunted Pollard. "If Jim Guy and Dorsey Bone ever get wise that it ain't them nesters that's doing this, business is going to pick up."

"I know it," said Red, "but they won't get together. They are both on the prod. Best thing you can do is

come on and go with us, for when that next run is made, you won't have no more business in this country, and you won't want to be here."

"I guess that's right," said Pollard, as he shot another glance at the two sleeping drunks. "Come on. Let's take another drink, to look natural, and then ride."

Pollard and Embry went back to their companions. They all took another drink, and left the place. A few minutes later High woke, rose and staggered to the door. What he saw when he looked out was Pollard, Embry, and six others riding west out of town. High went back and woke Short, with great difficulty. They staggered over to the bar, and Short said:

"Like—like to take another drink, podner, but it won't stay down. Don't wanter take a shingle off the house. Just gimme a flat pint road-bottle."

The barkeep filled the bottle, drove the cork home with the heel of his hand, and handed it to Short, who dropped it into a hip pocket as they staggered out the door. The bartender followed them to the door, and watched them make half a dozen efforts to mount their horses. At last they mounted and rode out of town, but they went east. The bartender grinned at them as they reeled in their saddles, and then fell to musing:

"Wonder who all them fellers is. Them two is just tramps, with a double-jag, but the ones that went out with Pollard. I never seen them before. Seems like he knowed 'em, but he didn't call any names. Wonder have they got anything to do with all this hell and pestilence on the Rafter 6 range? Jim Guy swears the nesters stampedes his steers, and kills up his stuff. Old Joel Truman, the granddaddy of the outfit, swears it's a lie. He says the nesters is all honest settlers. Tex Nolan says they gets three men in the last run they had, and lose one Rafter 6 hand, but no coffins ain't been bought in Hennepin. Something rotten about the whole

dang mess, but I can't be bothered, long as they don't hurt my business."

He went back to his post, wiped off the bar, and apparently forgot that there had been any strangers in his place that day.

CHAPTER III

TWO AGAINST MANY

High and Short were out of sight of the town, when Short wheeled his horse into a thicket to the left of the trail, and tore away through the chaparral. They circled north of the town, and crossed Soldier Creek, then stopped in a thick clump of timber.

"I'll bet you my hat agin yo'n," said High, "that you have took the wrong trail, and are heading for more trouble than a cat would have in a dog-house."

"You ain't got no hat," growled Short. "What I'm heading for is a solid job with Jim Guy—if I don't get killed two or three times, between here and the Rafter 6."

"Well, why don't you find the trail to the Rafter 6, instead of taking through the brush?" asked High. "I'm afraid in these woods. Something might bite me."

"Don't aim to go that way," grunted Short. "First trail I want to find is the one them gents takes when they leaves Hennepin. We heard 'em talk some, and I know they are mixed up in this range mess some way, but if we told Jim Guy that he'd say we was lying. He just *knows* it's Dorsey Bone and them nesters that's running him ragged. We got to have something more than talk. Come on."

"Just a minute, Short. Them gents with two guns on 'em is the worst lookin' things I ever seen outside of a cage. If we make a mistake and jump that gang — Do you recollect who I told you to write to, when I finally gets killed for followin' you?"

"Yeah."

"All right. They's just one more thing. Don't bury me in this damned

pasteboard bonnet. I don't want to show up at the heavenly round up with a thing like that on my head. The boys would ride me limber. About the only thing that I'd shoot a man for, now, would be to get his hat. Lead out. I've done give up hope."

Quarter of a mile farther on they came out in a plain, well-worn trail. In it were the fresh tracks of several horses. They followed the trail a hundred yards to where it forked. The right hand, leading up the creek to the Rafter 6 was the plainest, but the fresh tracks followed the other trail on west.

"Them gents went on west," said Short.

"You shore are getting to be a trail hound," jeered High. "They did go that way, and that's the best reason in the world why we should take this right hand. Heaven must be a lot better place than the Rafter 6, but I ain't in no hurry to get there, and if we runs into that gang of gunners we'll be knockin' at the Pearly Gates in about five minutes. If we follow that trail at the speed we're goin', we'll run into 'em long before I'm ready to die."

"We ain't goin' to follow the trail," said Short, "but I want to know where they live, and how. Come on."

Short turned out of the trail to his right, and took a course paralleling it. They rode swiftly on, mile after mile, with Short in the lead. At last, the going became rough. They were in the edge of the badlands. Short veered to his left, passed between two little hills, and came out in the trail. Then they jerked their horses to a stop, meaning to turn back, but it was too late. They had passed Pollard and his companions, and they rode fairly onto them. There was nothing to do but stand and take their medicine, as the other riders pulled up and Red Embry said:

"Hello, gents. How did you get here. We left you drunk and asleep in the Happy Day saloon, and we rid

pretty fast. How did you get ahead of us?"

"Why, I reck'n we're lost, pardner," said Short.

"Huh," grunted Embry. "I don't know about that, but you can be limber drunk, then get cold sober quicker than any two gents I ever seen. Where are you heading for?"

"Why, we was heading out for the D B Bar," lied Short. "We hears they need some cowhands, and—"

"Reach for the sky," snarled Loss Pollard, his two pearl-handled guns flashing out, and the rest of the men following his lead.

"Anything to oblige that much op-enfaced hardware," grinned High, as their hands went up.

"Take their guns, Red," ordered Pollard. "Now, you two tramps can take your hands down and listen to me, just one minute. You may be just a pair of saddle-tramps, but you don't act natural. You may not be lying about being drifters, but you shore lied about being drunk. I don't know what you knew before you heard Red and me talk, but you know too much now to be loose on the Rafter 6 range. Just fall in at the middle of the line. Red and me rides behind you and if you make a break— The reason we don't kill you now is that we don't want to leave any sign on the trail. Lead out boys, and use your spurs."

The men fell in and took the trail. Four of them went ahead of High and Short. Loss Pollard, Red Embry and two others followed them.

"Now you have played hell," muttered High. "We ain't got as much chance as a bug in a bottle. This is what I get by follerin' a damn fool that spits out whiskey. You won't never spit out any more."

"Shut up," growled Short. "If you had kept sober in Billings, we'd be all right now."

"Yeah, and if you had kept sober in Hennepin, we'd be all right now.

Even if you had sense enough to go on to—"

"Here, you two tramps," rasped Pollard. "Cut out that talking. We'll let you say your little piece just before you start up the rope ladder."

For a mile the trail was plain, but the country was growing rougher. Just before sunset the leaders quit the main trail, and turned north on a dim trail that led into the roughs. High and Short had done no more talking, but they had their eyes open, and were watching the course and the country through which they passed. There seemed little likelihood that they would come that way again, but they had nothing else to do, and watching such things was natural to them. A little while after they left the main trail they came out in a fairly level, open place.

"Tie their hands behind 'em, and blindfold 'em," ordered Pollard. "That's customary, and we'll have to do it when we get to the tree, anyway."

Their hands were bound behind them, and handkerchiefs tied over their eyes, then the band moved on, a man leading each of the captive's horses. Pretty soon it became obvious that they were going down a steep and rough incline. At last they stopped, and Pollard said:

"Well, here's the tree. Let's get it over with. I won't feel comfortable until we fix these gents so they can't talk."

"Hold on a minute, Loss," said Embry. "Don't go too fast. We got these two hombres, and they can't get away. You are boss of part of this deal, but I and my boys are doing the work, and I aim to say how it is done. I don't want to make no mistake. If this thing goes wrong, and I get caught, I'll have enough to answer for, without a couple extra killings. If these fellows are what you think they are, spies for the Rafter 6, somebody is going to look for 'em when they don't show up. Besides all that, I want to talk to 'em some."

"Oh, all right," said Pollard, in a disappointed tone. "I reck'n you are boss of that part of the deal. They ain't got a chance to get away, and we can hang 'em just as well in the morning. They'll have all night to think things over, and maybe they'll tell something reasonable in the morning, and save their necks."

High and Short could hear a hollow, echoing sound as the men talked, and knew that they were close under a bluff. They were taken from their horses and led away. When their blindfolds were removed, they saw that they were in a large cave. A fire burned brightly, and a scowling giant of a man was cooking supper. About twenty men sat about on bedrolls.

"Cook plenty, Tobe," jeered Pollard, "we got company."

"Untie their hands," ordered Embry. "They can't get away. It's customary to give a man whatever he wants, the last meal before he's hung. We can't do that, but we can give 'em plenty, such as it is, and let 'em have both hands to feed with. Now, then, I want to ask you chaps some questions. What has Jim Guy put you up to?"

"Who's Jim Guy?" asked Short, innocently.

"You know who Jim Guy is. He's foreman and part owner of the Rafter 6."

"What's the Rafter 6?" Short asked again.

"Now, see here," snapped Embry, "you can't put that baby stare stuff over on me. You are wise enough. You ain't common saddle-tramps. I know you are Rafter 6 men, and I want the straight of it. If you come clean, you might have a chance; if you don't, you get hung. It's up to you. Go ahead."

"All right," drawled Short, his big voice echoing in the cavern. "The straight of it is like this. My name is Short, and my partner's name is High. Them's all the names we got — in

this country. We comes up the trail from Texas with a herd of steers, and gets paid off at Billings. High gets drunk, and I loses a little at poker, and we are broke. Then I hears that the D B Bar needs hands, and we heads west lookin' for the job. We hits Hennepin for the first time about noon. We are hungry, and we eat. We are dry, and we drink. The hooch we gets is made of fly-paper juice, and we gets the tanglefoot. We goes to sleep in a saloon, and when we wakes up we starts out to find the D B Bar, and gets lost. Then you fellers —"

"I know what we fellers done," snapped Embry, "and I also know that you are a gifted liar. You two weren't drunk at all. That's all for you. Here, you little short half-pint. Say your name's High?"

"Yep," replied High. "Good name for a tall feller like me, ain't it?"

"Good enough for the little time you're goin' to need a name," said Embry, with a cold glare in his hard blue eyes. "Speak your piece, and tell the truth. Maybe it'll kill you, and you won't have to be hung."

"I can't thalk," grinned High. "I'm thung-thied."

"Oh, you are? Well, you talked like a preacher back on the trail, and—"

"Yeth, I just have spells of it, and I got one now."

"Oh, you have? Mean you won't talk. I'll find a way to cure that spell. I aim to find out—"

"Chuckaway!" yelled Tobe, the big cook, as he wiped the sweat from his face with a ragged shirt-sleeve.

"Aw, hell, Red," said Pollard. "You can't get nothin' out of them two liars. Let's eat, before the grub gets cold."

They all fell to on the camp fare, High and Short with the rest. There was no danger of them trying to make a break. They would collect a dozen bullets each before they got ten feet. In the midst of the meal a man entered the cave, trailing his spurs, and said:

"Hey, Loss, you and Red get this.

The Rafter 6 has got about five hundred — Hullo, who's the company."

"Just a couple of Jim Guy's spies," said Pollard. "Go ahead. They won't talk. We are feeding 'em, so they'll be heavy enough to break their necks when we hang 'em."

"I done went ahead, before I seen 'em," said the man. "My mouth always was too easy on the trigger. You and Red said you aimed to start a run as soon as they got another herd together. They got one, 'bout five mile this side the Rafter 6, in the Soldier Creek valley."

"All right," grunted Pollard. "Fall to and eat. We are going to ride."

When the meal was finished, Pollard said:

"Now, see here, Red. Every minute we keep these fellers alive, we are looking for trouble. We don't have to hang 'em. We can do it with a knife, and drop 'em down a crevice. Then—"

"No," snapped Red. "I told you I was boss of that part of the deal, and that goes. I'll leave Tobe and Big Hat to watch 'em. There's no whiskey here, and as long as them two ain't drunk, the devil couldn't get away from 'em. Hog-tie 'em, and put 'em in the pocket. We'll see how this run turns out. When morning comes, if I think they need hanging they'll get hung."

Nothing more was said. High and Short were bound hand and foot and dragged into a little cavern, which shelved down sharply below the main room. A free man would have had trouble enough getting out of it, and a bound prisoner had no chance at all. They were not gagged, for they could have yelled their heads off and no one would have heard them, except the cook and Big Hat. This latter gentleman was an Indian, more than six foot, and with as hard a face as a human ever wore as a handicap in the race of life. If the prisoners got noisy, it would be a real pleasure to Big Hat to silence them permanently.

CHAPTER IV

WHISKEY STRATEGY

Neither of them had spoken since being rolled down the incline into the pocket, but both High and Short were doing some thinking. Their prospects for escaping were not rosy. Pollard had said they knew too much, and they were sure that they did. If they could get to Jim Guy for a few minutes, they could make Mr. Pollard and his friends plenty of trouble.

They had put the little that they had heard in the saloon, and what they had heard since their capture, together, and had made a shrewd guess that Pollard was just a go-between, and had hired Embry and his gang of thugs to make Jim Guy willing to sell the Rafter 6. Silently, they squirmed up the sloping floor of the pocket until they could peer through a little opening and see their guards. The cook and the Indian sat by the fire, which was burning low. A worse looking pair of cut-throats never disgraced the West. Neither Short nor High had spoken, for a whisper would carry the twenty feet to where the guards sat. Suddenly, Short called:

"Hey, you fellows!"

"What do you want?" snarled Tobe.

"A little help," replied Short.

"Help," said Big Hat, as he and Tobe approached them together. "What do you mean help?"

"Why, we — Pollard said a feller that was going to be hung was entitled to anything he wanted, if he could get it. I got something in the pistol pocket of my pants that High and me would like to have a little shot of, if we could get to it."

"In yo' pocket?" grunted Big Hat. "Let's see." He reached in and caught Short by the waistband of his trousers, as he lay on his face. He dragged the old puncher up the slope as if he were a baby, and pulled that flat pint road bottle from his pocket. "Huh. Can't waste this on fellers that's going to be hung. Come on, Tobe."

"Hold on, fellers," Short pleaded. "Give us one little shot, to pep us up for the hanging."

"No," snarled Big Hat. "We need this."

High and Short lay where they were, side by side, watching through that little opening, and wondering what the outcome would be. It was a desperate gamble but they were in desperate condition. They saw Big Hat throw his head back, and heard a gurgling noise. Then he passed the bottle to Tobe.

"Wow!" yelled Tobe, "that stuff scorches."

"I like um hot," grinned Big Hat. "Let me have it."

That bartender in Hennepin must have intended to poison High and Short. At the second drink, Big Hat let out a wild yell, jerked his gun and fired into the roof of the cave.

"Goodbye, Short," whispered High. "You been studying how to be a damn fool ever since I knewed you. Pity for you to go now. You'd get yo' diploma now, for mixin' Injun and whiskey, when yo' hands is tied, and you ain't got ary gun."

"Shut up," replied Short. "Don't make a noise, and maybe he won't think of us. He can't pack that stuff far. It'll knock 'em clean out, and then we got a chance to—"

Wham! Big Hat's gun roared again. The bullet struck just above where High and Short lay, and showered them with dust and bits of stone.

"Here, Big," called Tobe, who was sitting on a bedroll, with the bottle in his hand. "Don't do that. Red don't want the fellers killed. Take another drink, and put up that gun."

Big Hat shifted the gun to his left hand, and took the bottle in his right. It was still about half full. The giant Indian threw his head back, wrapped his face around the neck of the bottle, and let it run empty. Almost half a pint of liquid fire went down that voracious gullet.

"Look out with that gun!" yelled Tobe, as the Indian took a staggering step toward him.

The cook had spoken too late. The gun roared, and the bullet went through Tobe's brain. The burly cook rolled off his seat, shuddered a moment, and lay still.

"S'matter, Tobe?" said Big Hat. "Sleepy? Let's kill them two fellers, and we both go to sleep. Pollard wants'm killed."

"Come on," whispered High. "Let's roll down the slope and get behind something, before he opens on us."

"No, wait. Look at him."

When Big Hat had taken two drinks, he began shooting because he was an Indian, and that was an old Indian custom, but that awful third drink had put three quarters of a pint of liquid fire into his stomach, and he was practically paralyzed, physically and mentally. He stood staring down at Tobe with a silly leer on his face.

"Come on, Tobe," he said. "Let's killum. I'll help you up." He stooped over and caught Tobe's hand, gave a pull and fell to his knees by the side of the cook. "'Smatter, Tobe? Can't talk. I wake you." He put his hand on Tobe's face, then took it away and stared at it wildly. It was covered with blood.

"Gosh, look at him!" whispered Short. "I—I feel like I had—"

"Dead, dead!" mourned Big Hat. "I killum my brother. Poor Tobe, he—" Big Hat broke off, and slowly raised his gun with a shaking hand."

"Look out!" whispered High. "He's goin' to take us, now. He—"

The gun wavered on up, until the muzzle was at Big Hat's temple, and then there was a flash and a roar. The giant Indian fell over, across Tobe's lifeless body.

"Hell!" gasped Short. "That is hell. I feel like I killed 'em both cold, with a pint of poison."

"You ain't got no call to worry over that," said High. "If we had had our

guns, and our hands free, we would have killed 'em both before now."

"I know that," said Short, "but killin' in a fight, and seein' them go that way is a whole lot different."

"Yeah," said High, "and it'll be a whole lot different with I and you, if any of them fellers comes back before we can get out of here. Listen to me. One night in a dance hall at Billings a dancehall girl that was half drunk, and crazy, showed me a little pearl-handled knife. She tells me her sweetheart gives it to her, and it cuts their love in two. She wanted to get rid of it, so she slips it into my right vest pocket. I can't get to it, but you can turn yo' back to me, and get yo' hand in that pocket."

Short turned over and felt in the pocket.

"Nothing there," he said. "I guess them killers taken it when they got yo' other knife."

"No they didn't. The dirty buzzards didn't put their hands in that pocket a tall. It's got to be there. We can't get out of this place, and find a knife, with our hands and feet tied like they are. Feel again."

"Here—here it is, down in the lining," panted Short, tearing at the lining of the vest. "I got it!"

"Fine. Hold on to it. I'll turn my back to yours. You hold the knife, and I'll open the blade."

After a few trials they succeeded in opening the small but keen blade. A moment later, High's hands were free but bloody. Short had gashed them in several places, in his blind efforts to sever the bond that held them. His own hands free, High made quick work of freeing his feet, and then the hands and feet of Short.

They climbed out of the pocket, and kicked the chunks together to make a light. Then they saw their own guns and belts lying on a ledge of rock. They caught them up joyously, and buckled them on. Come what might, they had a fighting chance now.

"Here's where I say goodbye to this pasteboard bonnet," grinned High. "Mr. Big Hat didn't wear such a big hat. It fits me, and I aim to trade with him. He won't need a hat no more."

"Come on," growled Short. "A minute is about a day and a half, now. We got to get out of here."

They found the passage that led out of the cave, and were creeping along it when Short caught High by the arm, and jerked him back against the wall, as he hissed:

"Listen! Somebody's coming."

A man had entered the passage from the outside, and was walking boldly along it. He was within two feet of them when Old Short swung his gun up and struck. There was a crunching noise, and the man went down and lay still.

"Out of here," snapped Short. "There may be more, but we got a better chance outside."

There was no other man. Loss Pollard had no taste for a mess like stampeding those cattle was going to be. Besides that, if High and Short escaped, they would make him more trouble than they could make anybody else. So, he had slipped away from Embry and his gang, and come back to put the two drifters out of the way. Mr. Pollard had made a fatal mistake, for Short had struck hard, and landed fair on the crook's head. A dead rascal and two fine pistols lay on the floor of the passage, as High and Short escaped into the clean, fresh air.

They found their own horses, tethered to saplings near the entrance to the cave. They mounted and took the only way out of the gulch. Within a few minutes they recognized the place where they had been blindfolded as they came into the roughs. Old Short grunted, took his bearings and led steadily on. They struck the main trail leading toward Hennepin, but still he kept on, until he reached the

spot where Pollard and his outlaws had captured them. Then he pulled up.

CHAPTER V

TRICKED

Short," High said, as they pulled up in the trail and he took a long, deep breath, "if you won't admit that you're a dang fool, this proves it. If it takes a fool for luck, you got four aces and the joker."

"Luck hell," grumbled Short. "Them was brains that you seen working, and didn't know what they was. If you'd had that pint of forty-rod, you'd of drunk it, and been dead by now, or maybe waiting for the sunrise, and a nice new necktie."

"Maybe so. I been skeered before, account of follerin' a fool, but I never had a spell like this. My feets is makin' running motions until I can't keep 'em in the stirrups. Strike a match, and see is my hair white."

"Shut up. You ain't got sense enough to be skeered that bad."

"Maybe not, but I got sense enough to know what I want, and right now I want to hit the trail for Hennepin, where we can get some drinks to steady our nerves, and settle our stomachs. The supper I et didn't ride very well."

"Dry up, idgit," said Short. "My brains gets you out of a mess, and you don't even say thank you."

"Thanks, Mister Short. It's amazin' how little it takes to get a feller out of trouble, when everything works right. If yo' brains was lost on a clean plate, you couldn't find 'em without a magnifying glass. But let's don't waste time arguin'. Let's hit the trail for Hennepin."

"We ain't goin' to Hennepin," declared Short. "Last time I seen Jim Guy, I tells him we'll help him hold his herd next time it runs, if we are close enough, and we are. Accordin' to specifications, the Rafter 6 is about twelve mile northeast of where we

are at. That feller said the herd was five-six mile this side of the ranch. We are goin' to set a course, and bust straight up Soldier Creek valley. Maybe we can get there in time."

"Listen, Short," High pleaded. "Folks don't go to school after they graduates. You can't never learn to be no bigger damn fool than what you are. If we rides in there, we mixes with that gang of two-gun killers. Just because you are a fool, and have had some luck, don't crowd it. I've followed you every way, except spitting out that likker, but I'm getting leg-weary."

"Faster up yo' fool face," snapped Short, "and let's get goin' before we miss the party."

Old Short took another look at the stars, set a northeast course, and spurred away up the valley. He didn't look back, but he knew High was following him.

When Jim Guy and Tex Nolan left High and Short on the Hennepin trail that morning, they rode straight for the west of the ranch. As they came in sight of the ranch house, Jim Guy said:

"Now, what the devil does that mean? There's a dozen D B Bar mounts, with saddles on, standing around the bunkshack, and Dorse Bone is setting in the door, bold as life."

"Maybe Dorse can tell you," drawled Tex, "I can't. Main thing is, don't start no gunstuff, because they's just two of us and a dozen of them."

Dorsey Bone, a fine-looking fellow of around forty, rose from his seat in the bunkhouse door and approached them as they dismounted. He smiled as he said:

"Hi'yer, Jim. I ain't on the prod today. I just want to be friendly, and talk to you some."

"I'm willin'," said Jim Guy, extending his hand. "What do you want to talk about?"

"About this mess you are in. I been

hearing for a month that there was hell and pestilence on the Rafter 6 range, but I didn't hear until a few days ago that you thought it was me and them nesters that was makin' the trouble. That ain't so."

"Ain't nobody else to do it," Jim said sullenly.

"Could be somebody else," said Bone. "Trouble with you is that you're stingy with yo' ideas. You get one into yo' head, and keep it. Now, take them nesters. They just barely got sense enough to crawl into their shacks and stop up the hole, to keep the wolfs from getting 'em at night. I figure that they are just claim-jumpers for somebody else. They ain't got much sense, but they got enough to know that if they ever raised a crop of anything, they couldn't haul it two hundred mile to market, with no road. So, that lets them out."

"Now, me, I done found out that there ain't the grass on the head draws of Soldier Creek, and back in the hills, that I thought there was. Two—three times lately, I've had an offer for the D B Bar that would about pay for the cabins and pens. I ain't chargin' nobody with nothing, but you and me knows that a big cattle syndicate has got ranches to the east of here, and to the west of here. Soldier Creek valley is good cow country, and they might want it bad enough to make you want to sell out, and then just take mine away from me. Don't that sound natural?"

"Yes, it does," admitted Jim Guy, "but—"

"Well, I talked to some of your boys, friendly, this morning, and they said you and Tex had rid east on a nester hunt. What did you find?"

"Couple of mares and colts dead at a water hole, and two cows and a calf that didn't die natural, at another place."

"That all?"

"Not quite," said Jim. Then he told Bone about the run-in with High and Short, and that he had taken them on

and advanced them fifty dollars, to spy out his range. Thinking they were strangers, and nobody would notice them.

"Well, I'll be damned," laughed Bone. "Just played right into their hands. Caught 'em with the goods, and then turned 'em loose and gives 'em fifty dollars to go. Well, that can't be helped now. Point is, whoever is doing this is getting rougher all the time, and they'll pour it on you good pretty soon. Just to show you that I ain't in on that and that I want to be on the level with you, I'll do two things. I'll sell you my ranch at what you say it's worth to you. Then I'll take my hands, right now, and go with you to yo' spread. Then, if anybody jumps your herd, we'll find out something."

"Thank you, Dorse," said Jim. "You are talkin' like a human cowman, now. I'll take you up on that. We'll go to the spread, and see can we find out who does this meaness. Then when it's over, we'll agree on a fair price for the D B Bar, and I'll give you a shade the best of the deal. All of us together can take some of them buzzards whole, and make 'em talk. They's just two that I want to hang, and thems that High and Short gents. I got a coil of new rope in the chuck wagon, and if I can ketch them two, I aim to cut two lengths of it, and hang 'em so good they'll stay until the ropes rot. Let's go to the spread."

High and Short held their course to the northeast. They had gone about five miles, when they jerked their horses to a stop. Off there in the valley ahead of them, guns were crashing.

"Now look what I follerred a fool into," jeered High. "Come on. Let's run for Hennepin, where we can get some drinks."

"Shut up," Short hissed. "Listen! Somebody's coming, and—"

"Yes, and I want to be gone when he gets here."

"Get yo' rope, fool," snapped Short. "We want to take one whole. Them fellers in that cave can't never tell nothin'. Look out, here they come."

Guns were still roaring, farther up the valley, but two men came storming into the little opening, where High and Short had stopped in the shadows of a clump of trees.

"I'll take the one in front," said Short.

The fleeing riders were fairly abreast of them when their ropes shot out. The two men were on the ground and securely bound, before they got their breath back. The horses had stormed on across the valley.

"Well, let's load 'em, and get on to that cow outfit," said High. "I'm afraid, out here in the dark."

"No," said Short. "If we do that, we may run into some more of the gang, and get 'em took away from us. I want to trade them two gents to Jim Guy for a steady job. We'll just gag 'em, so they can't yell, and tie their feet to saplings, so they'll be here when we get back. I promised Jim Guy we'd help him hold that herd. Come on. Let's ride from here."

"I'll bet you my half of the proceeds agin yo'n that you ain't got as much sense as the Lord give a louse," jeered High. "If we barge into that mess, nobody knows which side we are on, and they'll all open on us and just about ruin us."

Short made no reply, but galloped away toward where guns were still roaring intermittently, in a fight that was dying out.

Jim Guy, Dorse Bone, and a dozen others had stopped in the edge of a little glade. The battle was over. A few of Embry's men had escaped, plenty of them lay dead, but not one had been taken alive.

"I shore wanted to get one that could talk a little," said Jim Guy. "We never will know the straight of this mess."

"I did too," said Bone. "I wanted to see the mess cleared up. I want you to know that I and my boys weren't in it."

"I'm shore of that, now, Dorse, but — Listen! There's somethin' coming back. Two of 'em. Swing out, fellers, and lets take 'em all in one piece."

The next moment, High and Short had ridden square into a ring of riders, with guns in their hands.

"Reach for the atmosphere," roared Dorse Bone. "You ain't got a chance."

"We're reachin' with both hands, gents," said Short. "Is Jim Guy in this outfit?"

"I shore am," replied Guy.

"Well, Mr. Guy, we got a couple fellers—"

"Never mind," snapped Guy. "We've got a couple fellers, too, and we don't want to trade. Take their guns, boys, and lash their hands to their saddle-horns. That's it."

"But—but, Mr. Guy, we are High and Short, and—"

"Oh, you are? Then I know I don't want to trade. Come on fellers. Let's ride for camp, where I can get some of that new rope. I aim for these two gents to stay hung, when I hang 'em."

They all lined out for the cowcamp. High and Short rode in silence. Neither of them spoke until they dismounted at the camp, and sat together near the big campfire. Then High said:

"I find out one thing in this mess. The Lord don't take care of fools, children and drunk men. He leaves the fools out, or He'd have you in a cradle, with a bottle."

"Shut up, idgit. This is just a mistake."

"It shore is," said High, "and you made it. Whatever you do, don't tell these fellers the truth, or they'll hang us shore as hell. I don't believe half that has happened to us, myself."

CHAPTER VI

ALIBI

There was a grim picture around that campfire. Half a dozen men, more or less seriously wounded, lay about on blankets, with such crude bandages as their

companions could make from torn up shirts. Six men were absent. Two of Dorsey Bone's riders, and four of the best men in the Rafter 6 spread. They were lying somewhere out on the battlefield, dead or mortally wounded, and could not be found until daylight came. Jim Guy came from the chuck-wagon, dragging two generous lengths of new rope. He handed one to Tex Nolan, while he tied a noose in the other. Then Jim Guy said, grimly:

"I reck'n you two buzzards knows what these ropes is for. Have you got anything to say?"

"Why, not much, I reck'n," said Short, "except that you gents is makin' a big mistake. We ain't did—"

"I know what you've did," snarled Guy. "What I want to know is what outfit you kiotys belong to. Who is it that's been running the Rafter 6 ragged, killin' up my stuff and stamperin' my herd? You been spying for 'em, and you're bound to know."

"I don't just exactly know all them things," drawled Short, "so I can't tell. We thought we belonged to the Rafter 6 outfit. You sorta half-hired us this morning, and paid us some in advance."

"Yes, and I'm goin' to pay you the rest I owe you, right now," said Guy, in a cold, hard tone. "Get 'em ready, boys. They won't talk. That kind never do."

Guy dropped his loop over Short's head, and Tex Nolan did the same favor for High.

"Just a minute, Mr. Guy," said Old Short, calmly. "I don't owe nobody in the world nothin' except you. I don't want Saint Peter askin' me why the hell I didn't pay you. We spends a dollar for grub, two bits for a pair of drinks, and four bits for a pint road-bottle. The other forty-eight twenty-five of them fifty you give us is in my pants pocket. I reck'n my saddle and gun is worth a dollar and six bits, and that squares us. We got a clean alibi, but if you gents won't take it—I ain't got no special last words to nobody."

"Let me see you a minute, Jim, before you string these fellows," said Dorsey Bone, who had been standing by in silence. They walked a little way from camp, and Bone went on. "Jim, I'm afraid you got another one of them ideas that you don't want to give up. I've seen plenty of pretty bad mistakes made in range wars and the like. I believe them two drifters are natural cowhands, and on the level, or they wouldn't take this so easy. Give 'em a chance to prove that alibi. If they don't do it, I'll help you hang 'em."

"All right, Dorse," said Guy. "You have done a lot for me tonight, and I owe it to you. Go ahead and talk to 'em."

"I'm placing a little bet on you two fellows," said Bone, when he returned to the camp. "If you don't win nothin', I aim to help hang you. You say you got an alibi. Let's have it."

"We got two of 'em," said High, speaking for the first time, "but they're tied to trees, about a mile from here. If Short hadn't been a dang fool we'd of brought 'em along, and we wouldn't be kissin' the world goodbye through a hemp window now."

"What do you mean two alibis?" asked Bone.

"Two of that gang, hog-tied and lariated to saplings," High replied.

At daylight the men rode from camp. Part of them went to the scene of the fight, to look for their dead. Jim Guy, Dorsey Bone, and half a dozen others rode with High and Short, to find their alibi, and they found it.

"Why, that's Red Embry," said Dorsey Bone, "the worst outlaw in the West."

"That's me," said Red, sitting up on the ground. "You fellows have got me dead this time. I just took on one rough job too many."

"Who hired you fellows to pull this stuff?" asked Jim Guy.

"I ain't talkin' about that," said

Embry. "It couldn't do me no good, and it might hurt somebody else. I can see them two new ropes." Jim Guy had the ropes in his hands, still intending to hang High and Short with them. "Fact is, I don't know who was putting up the money. I traded with one man, and I won't name no names. Go ahead and do it."

Jim Guy used his two new ropes, and then the party rode on to the cave in the roughs. When they came upon Pollard, lying in the passage, Dorse Bone gave a long whistle:

"Loss Pollard! What was he doing in this mess?"

"He's the gent that Embry traded with," said Short. "He runs agin my gun in this narrow passage last night, and busts his head."

Bone and Guy gave Old Short an odd glance, and they went on into the main cave, where High and Short told their story.

"There's proof that they ain't lyin'," said Tex Nolan, as he kicked High's pasteboard helmet out of the way.

The whole party rode back on the Hennepin trail to where the Rafter 6 trail turned off. There they pulled up.

"Here's them forty-eight twenty-five, Mr. Guy," said Short, "and you

can take my gun or something for the rest. I—"

"No," said Guy. "You boys earned that fifty, and here's another fifty. Take it. Now, I want you to go on to the Rafter 6, and I'll give you a steady job."

"No, I reck'n we couldn't do that," said High. "This hundred will take us back to Texas. We're timid, and afraid of boogers. 'Sides that, it's too late to get located on Strange Range before winter. We'll get a few drinks in Hennepin, and head east. So long, and good luck."

There goes the gamest pair of waddies that I ever saw," said Jim Guy, as they watched the two drifters jog down the Hennepin trail. "I don't need hands, now, but I wish they had stayed."

"Hiram, son," said Short, as they headed east out of Hennepin, well fed, and High carrying a copious liquid cargo, "we had orto taken that job with the Rafter 6."

"Let me get in front," snapped High. "I've followed a dang fool far enough. If you take a notion to turn back, I don't want to see you, for it's too late in the season for a dogy like me to locate on Strange Range."

next month
High and Short
will be back again in
a novelette by J. E. Grinstead

SCARED TO DEATH

When they told the new range boss they'd run 'cause they was "skeered," he saids "Stay around here and we'll fill your pockets with rocks to make you heavy enough to hang." But after the range war, nobody said much—most of the gunmen wouldn't ever say no more.

In the May ALL WESTERN

On Sale March 31

The Cactus City Gazette

CACTUS CITY, ARIZONA

VOL. 1

NO. 3

DUDE RANCH TRAGEDY

NEWCOMER MISGAUGES DISTANCE—BURIES SELF

The Six-Point Shooting Star and Crescent Dude Ranch is getting quite a play these days. The SPSS&C is the old Box O spread, and business is so good that Pat Bryant hired three more riders to help ride herd on the dudes. And do they need herding!

Early the other morning, one of them who had just arrived was getting his first eyeful of scenery. He particularly admired Red Mesa, which in the early morning light looked plumb beautiful and appeared to be so close you could reach out and touch it. So the stranger allows he'll stroll over to it before breakfast, and Pat, who was husky around the corrals says okay, go ahead.

Pat figured the dude would walk a half-mile or so, then tumble to the fact that the clear air in this country is plumb deceiving and that Red Mesa was ten-twelve miles away. So Pat forgot all about the dude until along in the afternoon, when that worthy comes dragging himself in, all hot and dusty, generally pooped out—and plenty mad.

As it happened, Pat was standing alongside the little trickle of water which runs from the spring to the south corral, so he wasn't surprised when the dude started taking off all his clothes. He figured that the dude was aiming to lay down in the trickle of water, about four inches deep and two feet wide, and try to cool off.

But when the dude rolls up his clothes and ties the bundle on top of his head, why Pat figures the sun must of got him, so he inquires what in hell is the idea.

(Continued bottom second column)

PERSONALS RETURN OF A NATIVE

Hank Norton, the railroad agent, is back on the job in Cactus City. He was transferred down to Yuma a few years ago, but he didn't like it down there a-tall. Hank says that it rains in Yuma every single winter and that year before last it rained twice. The damp climate almost ruined his health, so the railroad sent him back to Cactus City. There ain't no place like home.

BATTLE AT FLYING W

The boys out at the Flying W are doing their own cooking these days—until Wun Wing, the Chinook cook, recuperates from numerous bruises and other wounds, which same were inflicted by Camel Collins.

It seems that Camel was trying to live up to his nickname by swilling down numerous and copius cups of coffee at each sitting. Finally Wing got tired of shagging back and forth with the coffee pot, so he figured to wean Camel off'n the java with a little sarcasm. After about the dozeneth trip to the kitchen, he hints, "You like coffee, huh Camel?"

Camel, who ain't no slouch with his tongue, rips right back: "Yeah, I like coffee, but I hate to drink so dam much water to get a little coffee." The fight was on.

Needless to say, Wing didn't put up no battle a-tall. He's about as weak as his coffee.

"You won't fool me twice!" snaps out the dude. "I miscalculated the distance over to that mesa, and it took me all day to walk over there and back. But I got the range of things now—and I'm going to swim across this here river."

So saying, he dives into the four inches of water and buries his head in the sand.

SCIENTIFIC DISCOVERY

BIOLOGICAL PHENOMENON IN CHICKEN TAMALE

Professor Hoenshall is all fired up again, this time over what he calls a "incredible biological phenomenon"—meaning that it can't be so but there it is.

The Professor was eating a genuine Chicken Tamale at the Chihuahua Chili Parlor when he made the discovery. The chicken in the tamale, he says, tasted extra good even though the lazy Mexican who made the tamale did a poor job of skinning the chicken. That didn't bother the Professor any. In fact, that's how he come to make the discovery which he says will startle the scientific world. It is the first report on record, he claims, of anyone finding maltese fur on a chicken.

So far, nobody has had the heart to take the Professor aside and explain to him the Facts About Life and the Truth About The Chicken in Chicken Tamale.

LEGAL PROCEEDINGS

LOBO KILLS A STEER

Jay Roark has filed a charge of petty larceny against Lobo Lavers. Jay has been losing a steer from his prize herd occasionally, and the other day he found a dressed steer of the right dimensions hanging up in Lobo's barn.

Lobo got plumb indignant when accused of butchering the steer, but it don't look like indignation will do him any good. Like Jay says: "That steer shore as hell didn't hust into Lobo's barn and commit suicide by hangin' and skinnin' itself."

(Continued first column page 77)

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EDITORIAL

I wish to apologize for no
printing he sorry abou he
hold-up, bu you see we have
run out of—well, you can see
for yourself wha we have run
ou of. I 's he le er which
comes be ween S and U,
which is he only way I can
cl you.

I say we have run ou of
hem, bu it looks dam funny
o me, so if any low, sneak-
ing, skulldodging son-of-
sheep-eating sidewinder wi h
a bum sense of humor has
swiped our 's, hen here's go-
ing o be hell o pay.

Hereaf er, no loafers will
be allowed o do heir loafing
in the composing room of he
Gaze e. I ain' accusing no-
body, bu like I said, i's dam
funny we'd run ou of 's.

JUSTIFIED EXTERMINATION

After only five minutes of
deliberation, the jury acquit-
ted Sim Delancy, charged
with killing Sammy the
Slicker. The fracas, you
remember, was the result of
a draw-poker game, and the
jury figured that any hombre
who held four aces after a
three-card draw, like Sammy
did, was due to be exter-
minated.

SAWDUST SHOTS

Judge Mott wishes to make
public the following notice:
Hereafter, all you hombres
had better resee your sights
and learn to hit the box of
sawdust provided for the
purpose, or else tobacco-
chewing will be prohibited
while court is in session.

"POSSES PREFER POKES."
Poke's General Store an-
nounces new shipment of
hemp ropes, for lariats or
stretching. Cactus City's lead-
ing citizens testify to our rope's
stretching qualities. (Adv.)

OBITUARIES

On account of the Indians
over at the reservation hav-
ing their Wild Grape Fiesta
last week, Coroner Dan Sawyer
had a lot of business to
attend to. Every death in
the county has to be officially
recorded, you know, so Dan
went over to the reservation
to check up after the three-
day bust. In the official
Death Record book he put
down:

*One dozen Indians (maybe
thirteen), died of fighting ac-
count of wild grape juice.*
Dan also made a trip down
below Arroyo Seco, which he
recorded as follows:
*One sheepherder named Pete,
just died.*

GRAVESIDE RHYTHM

No doubt a lot of Cactus
City folks was surprised to
learn that old Jobe Dean left
quite a sockful of money
when he died. That is, it
was quite a pile for an
hombre like old Jobe, who
went around in rags and
looking he had never had a
square meal. The big sur-
prise, however, was the will that
Jobe left. He directed that his
money be used to
buy him a new set of clothes,
a fancy casket and a hand-
carved marble monument for
his grave. What was left
ever was to go to a person
for preaching a burial ser-
vice.

A good crowd was on hand
at the cemetery. A fancy
funeral don't happen every
day, so the folks came even
if none of them didn't have
any use for Jobe. He was
about the most hated man in
the community, account of
being stingy. The only thing
he ever gave to anybody was
the small pox.

Well, in order to show no
partiality to either of the two
local sky-pilots, a preacher
was brought down from
Coyote Wells to handle the
burial. This imported par-
son preached a real long ser-
mon. There was quite a sum
left over for him, and he evi-
dently figured to earn it. Not
knowing old Jobe like the
rest of us, and figuring that
the crowd was all Jobe's
friends, he told all about

Jobe being a swell hombre,
a power in the community,
and an all-around good fellow
—none of which Jobe was.

The parson had spent
about half an hour telling
about the virtues of the de-
ceased, when Bull Billings,
who was standing next to me,
got uneasy and bellowed out
in what he thought was a
whisper: "Say, do you sup-
pose he's burrin' the wrong
man?"

SOCIETY NEWS

JUDGE AS SOCIAL ARBITER

Judge Mott has took it on
himself to act as referee in
the squabble about the statue
among the ladies of the
Ladies Sociable Society. The
Judge says he aims to settle
the matter peaceable and to
the satisfaction of all.

Well, maybe he will, but
pleasing all of a bunch of
females is like trying to
shove butter up a wild-cat's
nose with a hot poker: it can
be done, but it requires
plenty patience and fortitude.

MAVERICK HOGTIED

Maverick Moore came back
from Coyote Wells on last
night's train. He showed up
at the *Gazette* office this
morning wearing a new pur-
ple suit, a hard collar and a
silly grin. After consider-
able shying around, Maverick
divulged the reason for his
new clothes, etc. Said reason
being that while in
Coyote Wells, Maverick done
got hisself hitched.

Thinking to be sociable
about the matter, I offered
Maverick a shot of red-eye,
which he declined by saying
he was laying off the stuff
account of his health. Next
I offered him a stogie, which
he also refused.

"On account of your
health?" I asked, staring
him in the eye.

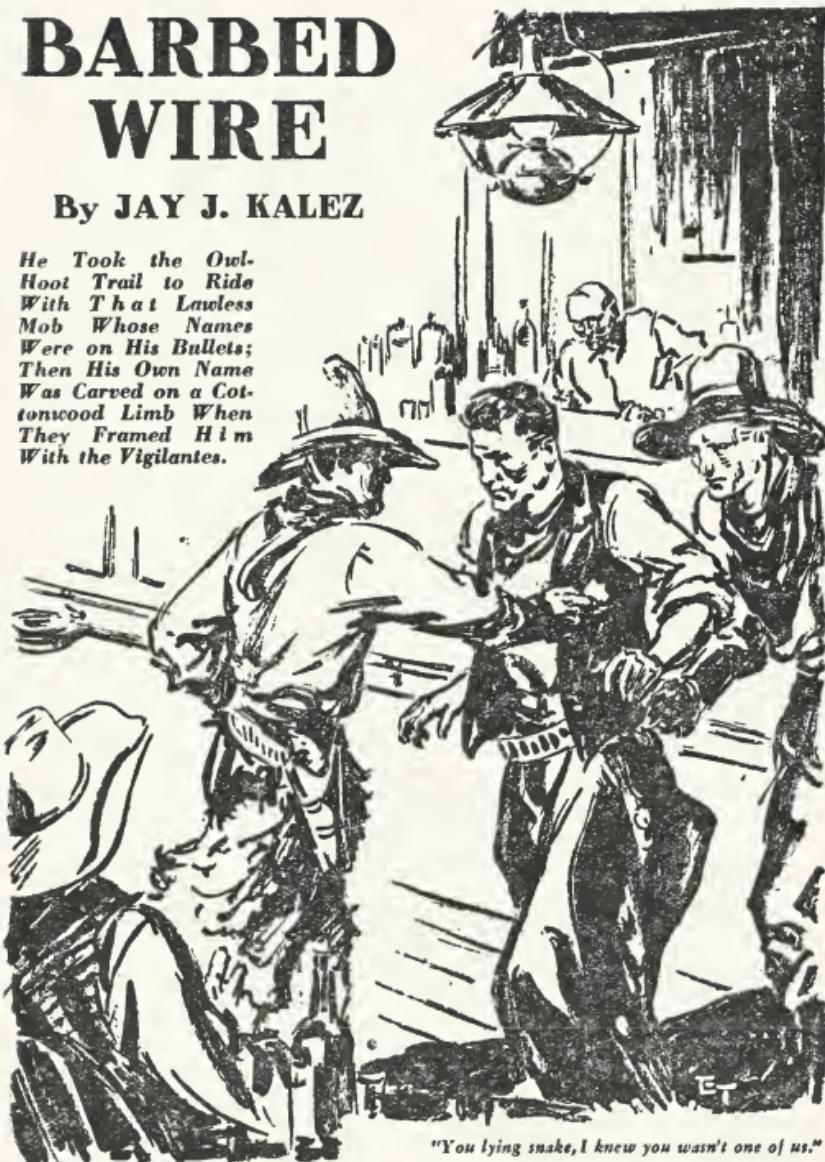
"Yeah, my health," says
Maverick, easing hisself out
like a coyote skulking away
from a fresh-killed calf.

Being a sociable citizen,
though a bachelor, all I can
say is that the *Gazette* con-
gratulates Maverick and
hopes that his wi— his
health will at least allow him
to play poker and shoot an
occasional game of pool.

BARBED WIRE

By JAY J. KALEZ

*He Took the Owl-Hoot Trail to Ride
With That Lawless Mob Whose Names
Were on His Bullets; Then His Own Name
Was Carved on a Cottonwood Limb When
They Framed Him With the Vigilantes.*



"You lying snake, I knew you wasn't one of us."

For hours Steve Brandt had allowed his mount to pick its own trail through the scab-rock scatter of the badland's broken coulees. Now, with faint echo of a shot from somewhere beyond

the coulee rim, he jerked reins. His lean, leathery-tanned features set beneath their sun-stain as he listened. Faintly, he caught the distant bawl of cattle. A pitiful bawl, almost a moan in the badland quiet.

Steve's hand eased the gun at his hip. His knee pressed the rifle swung in a boot from his saddle horn. The warning of the old mule Skinner he had met at the desert rim repeated itself. "Strangers ain't none too welcome in the Saw-tooth Basin," the warning echoed. "Not 'less their brand tallies Pete Sutton and his Bar 7 outfit."

Steve had offered no hint that Pete Sutton and his Bar 7 outfit was the very combination taking him into the Basin. The old desert freighter had sensed that with the craftiness of his range years. Sensed as well the mission of a lone two-gunned rider inquiring the trail into a district torn from months of bloody range war. Gunmen usually traveled alone. Cattlemen preferred hiring their killers that way.

Steve had not attempted to change the old freighter's insinuated belief. He was no hired killer, but after all, the mission carrying him into the Basin was just that. The independent cattlemen of the Saw-tooth Basin were being driven off their range. Hired killers were ambushing the more determinate stickers and removing them by the lead route.

The pleas of the independents had reached the Association. The Association had a name for the men it sent to dig to the bottom of these range grabs, regardless of from what rank their representative might have been recruited. Steve was the second Association man to enter the Basin. The first had entered, never to be heard of again.

Cautiously, Steve climbed his horse to the coulee rim. A worn cattle trail swung at right angles to dip abruptly over the rim of a second deeper coulee a hundred yards beyond. Steve moved his horse on, to draw up with a jerk at the second coulee edge. Below, a trampled dust cloud hooded a bawling, milling herd. The pivot of their slow circling was a rock-rimmed water

hole, set to center the coulee bottom. Across, the opposite walls lifted almost perpendicular, flaring fan-like as they spread.

Steve straightened in his saddle as he stared down. Below a four-wired fence, slick and shiny in its newness, encircled the water hole. A break in the milling herd made it visible. Made visible too, a sprawled, still form alongside the hoofs of a sagged hipped horse pushed close against the wires.

The faint echo of that shot he had heard in the coulee beyond, identified itself. Steve touched spurs. His mount picked its footing down the steep trail to the coulee bottom. Steve felt his blood tingle with sight of the jumble of brands in the milling herd. Mixed strays, these, critters from a dozen outfits. Drifters from the main herds, milling here to die in sight of water, dumb martyrs to one man's range greed.

Steve pushed his horse through the circling beasts to the sprawled form alongside the fence and dismounted. The man was dead, drilled at the hatrim. His one extended hand still gripped a pair of wire snips. Steve read the drama of a few moments before. The dead cowhand at his feet, coming upon this dying herd beside the water hole, had dismounted with the intent of cutting the wires and removing the barrier to the suffering animals. He had paid for his merciful intent with his life. From somewhere above, an ambusher's bullet had cut him down.

Staying close to his horse, Steve searched the opposite coulee rim. It offered no sign. He reached down and lifted the wire snips from the dead man's hand. With the same move he slipped his rifle from its saddle boot. Still staying behind his horse, he reached out and snipped the fence's top wire. It parted with a sing. So, too, did the sing of a rifle bullet part the water of the pool ahead.

Steve dropped to one knee. From

the pool-splash he glimpsed the bullet's course. His rifle poised ready. On the opposite coulee rim, a smoke-puff blurted from behind a scab-rock ledge. Steve's rifle barked with the whine of a second bullet. Up on the rim, an arm-spread form popped erect, poised an instant, then slumped forward to drape lifelessly across the barrier that had concealed him.

Still kneeling, Steve waited. The man on the rim did not move. A minute and Steve snipped the remaining wires of the fence. The milling cattle about seemed to sense relief in the snap of the wires. One by one, they began nosing through the break. An eye still to the rim above, Steve turned to the dead man at his feet.

Leaning his rifle against a fence post, he caught the dead man beneath the shoulders and lifting him almost erect, dragged him towards his horse. A step and he halted to hurl himself sideways. The body flopped to the ground. Into a fence post an inch past Steve's head, a rifle bullet showered a spatter of splinters.

Steve grabbed for his rifle. That shot had come from his side the coulee. He did not have to search to be certain. Framed against the sky on the coulee rim from which he had just descended, two horsemen pushed close to the rim edge to pour their lead down. Only their distance gave Steve a chance. They were still some ways back from where the rim trail dipped over the edge to descend.

Steve's rifle lifted. As quickly it dropped. This was no place to shoot it out with odds two to one. Only the dust cloud of the crowding cattle about offered a hint of protection from the fire above. Steve leaped toward his horse. Hitting the saddle, he whirled his mount into a race across the coulee bottom to where the wing-rocks of the opposite wall offered some sign of bullet shelter.

On the coulee rim, the two horsemen scattered their shots. Riding

low, Steve dug spurs as he weaved. To the opposite coulee wall and the worn bottom trail swung behind a fence-like break. Lead spattered about the rocks as Steve pushed his horse through the opening. An instant he halted. The break seemed to screen a steep, rugged trail that led up through the alley-like crevice to the rim above.

Steve peered around his sheltering barrier. Across, on the opposite rim, the pair of riders were racing toward the trail head leading to the coulee bottom. Steve recognized pursuit. With a dig of spurs he sent his mount up the steep ascent.

Almost to the rim above, the trail suddenly lost its sheltering screen of wing-rocks. A bullet spattered as Steve broke into the clear. Steve only urged his horse. A few rods above the trail leveled off and dipped over the rim. That was his goal. His horse dug to his spur rakes.

A dozen strides and suddenly it snorted and reared in a wild shy to one side. Steve gripped to steady the animal. Its lunge was too great. A clatter of rocks and it stumbled to its knees to half drag itself over the rim top. The momentum hurled Steve forward. His clawing hand stung to the spray of spattered lead as a bullet plunked into the rock beside him. He lit in a sprawl behind the low ledge that fenced the rim lip.

Steve shook his head to clear his jarred senses. A pace ahead he saw what had caused his horse to rear in its wild shy. Across the rock ledge behind which he lay, dropped the body of the dead gunman he had accounted for from the waterhole below. The ambushing killer lay with rifle at his side, his head dangling half hidden over the ledge edge. A few yards back, protected from sight by the rim dip, stood the killer's horse. Steve stiffened as he caught the animal's brand. It was the Bar 7 of Pete Sutton's outfit.

Still crouching low, Steve crawled to the rim ledge and peered over.

Below, the two riders from the opposite rim had already gained the coulee bottom. Never pausing at the waterhole, they now raced across the bottom on Steve's trail.

Behind the ledge, Steve gripped his rifle. That pair of riders had no intent he should escape. His plan of entering the Basin unsuspected was blasted. Blasted unless . . .

Steve had turned for a sight of his horse. The animal stood alongside the Bar 7 mount. Sight of the sprawled Bar 7 brand flashed a possibility. A greater possibility with the dead killer an arm's reach away. Steve grasped at the chance.

Crawling quickly to the Bar 7 horse, Steve grabbed its reins and tossing a rock to turn his own mount back, led the animal away from the rim into a mess of broken pinnacle rock beyond. A cavelike opening beckoned ahead. A push through and he was out of sight from the rim trail.

Leading the Bar 7 horse still deeper, he dropped its reins and whirled to take a position at the turn edge. Ahead loomed the rim trail. If his ruse failed, he at least had the gunning advantage on whoever might try to roust him from his hideout. Already, he caught the clatter of digging hoofs ascending the trail.

"There yeh be," a hoarse voice suddenly bellowed, as over the rim popped a horse and rider. "I knew I got the skunk on that last shot. Seen 'im take lead when his horse went down." The speaking rider lifted his arm in a point at the sprawled body at the rim ledge.

The trailing rider pushed alongside the burly chested speaker. "Yuh shore bored him, Pete," he offered loudly, leaning his runty, sag-shouldered form forward to garb the reins of Steve's sweat-streaked horse. "It's him, too. Hob said he'd be ridin' a reservation horse. There's yuhr IS burn. That Tipped T hombre we potted off the rim, must've been lightin' trail for 'em."

The heavy chested rider addressed as Pete, drooled a barrage of oaths in reply. "Hob should've knowed them was Jed Graham's plans," he finally spoke. "We hadn't been workin' them bottom tracks this way and heard 'em shootin' their way through that water hole fence, Mister Association Detective would've walked right in on us."

"Yeah," the runty rider grunted. "An' right in on our reception fer Jed and his Independent's pow-wow tonight. Hob must've been asleep."

"Asleep or this showdown is bringin' out the coyot' in 'em," the man Pete mumbled savagely. "Come on. We're gettin' into Dog Trot befer Jed and his herd start to bunch. Hob better be talkin' fast to my way a-thinkin'."

The heavy-chested rider swung his mount into a gallop down the trail. His runty companion followed. From behind the pinnacle rocks, Steve watched. Hardened killers, this pair. They had been waiting in the badland brakes for the one purpose of picking up his trail and waylaying him with a bullet before he reached his destination. Before he rode in on the mysterious reception the runty rider had hinted awaited Jed Graham and his meeting of Independents that night in Dog Trot.

Steve groped for a meaning to the words he had gathered. He knew of the meeting Jed Graham was calling that night. He had timed his arrival in Dog Trot accordingly. With drift into town of the dozen or so Independent outfits, his own identity and purpose was less apt of suspicion. Something, however, had gone wrong with that plan.

Pete Sutton seemed to know of it even to his route. If he knew that he knew more. So far the Independents had fought Sutton's hired killers as individuals. Tonight they were uniting to ride herd of the range renegades as one. Clean it of paid killers in one mass attack. If Pete Sutton

knew that, he was not apt to be caught unprepared.

Steve swung into the saddle of the Bar 7 animal. His plan had formed even as he watched the killer pair identify the gunman's body on the rim edge as his own. The brand on his horse had completed the ruse. Now the Bar 7 horse he topped offered a further break. At least the animal would carry him into Dog Trot with some shield to suspicion.

About to swing the Bar 7 animal down the trail, Steve caught a sudden lift of its ears in a point across the coulee. He followed the point. Across, on the opposite rim, a spiral of dust hinted of a rider hurriedly swinging out of sight behind the brakes. Steve sensed the feel of trailing eyes, perhaps through a range glass. Quickly he pulled away from the rim. Outlined against the sky he offered too perfect a target.

Once clear the rim Steve slowed his mount's pace to a walk. He had no intent of overhauling the pair ahead. His own mount had made no attempt to follow. The fact made it more certain someone had been watching him from the opposite rim. Sight of a rider would hold his horse to its lonesome watch beside the dead body at the rim trail head.

It was nearing sundown when Steve finally topped a low rise and sighted the little cow town of Dog Trot, sprawled in the gray dust haze below. He had timed his arrival well. Giving his horse a free rein, he rode into town. The Bar 7 animal seemed to know its usual goal. Midway through the single, dusk-wrapped street, it suddenly turned and halted before a crowded hitching rack fronting the already lighted windows of a wide-doored saloon.

Steve glanced about. He had arranged for no definite meeting place with Jed Graham and his vigilantes. He carried a letter of identification in his pocket but he had no intent of

presenting it until the proper moment.

Swinging from his saddle, Steve dropped his reins over the rack bar. Rounding the string of hitched animals he caught the sudden lift of inspecting eyes from the mixed group about the saloon entrance. It was the horse he rode that seemed to command attention. He was to the entrance and amid the group before he realized the cause of their stares.

Most every animal at the rack carried a hip-sprawled Bar 7 brand. He had ridden into a very nest of Bar 7 riders. Ridden in and been identified as a stranger despite the brand upon the animal he rode. The ease of gunhands toward hips shrieked his hazard.

Steve realized his position. It was too late to attempt to turn back. Such a move was sure to betray him. Boldly, he swung past the entrance crowd and entered the saloon. As boldly he stepped to the bar. For a moment no one seemed to notice him. Then a queer hush began to settle. In the bar mirror, Steve saw the crowd about slowly shift. They stepped apart to leave poised at his back, a tall, heavy-chested man with thumbs hooked to his gun belt. It was the hoarse-voiced rider from the coulee rim. Beside him stood his runty companion.

"'Peers yuh've ridden hard and far, stranger," Pete Sutton purred from a pace behind. "That brand yuhr forkin' might be right interestin' hereabouts."

Steve steadied himself. He realized his helplessness. There would be no chance with gunplay here. Sutton was not the only man poised to cover him. He thought fast.

"Right interestin' to certain parties, mister," Steve turned to speak, meeting Sutton's glare. "Right important, too, reckon, considerin' trail signs."

Pete Sutton's eyes squinted. The hooked thumbs at his gun belts tightened. "Meanin'?" he grunted.

Steve read the danger signal. It would take more than ordinary words

to halt this play. His mind flashed to the cursed threats he had heard Sutton utter at the coulee rim. They offered a hope. If he repeated what he knew Sutton already suspected or knew, it would at least be a play for time. Repeat it as a message from the very man Sutton had muttered against. His gamble would be that the man Hob had not already put in his appearance.

"Meanin', I got words aplenty for certain parties once I'm convinced." Steve spoke slowly. "Words from a gent that might be a bit detained. A gent that might call himself Hob."

The sudden tightening of Pete Sutton's lips satisfied Steve he had played his hand right. Sutton's head nodded toward a room at the bar end. Steve moved in response to the signal. Barely to the door and Sutton stepped close. "What's happened?" he whispered hoarsely. "Graham found out Hob's workin' fer me? He learned what's waitin' fer him and his pack when they call that meetin' here tonight?"

Steve played for time as he watched the half dozen men trail them into the room and scatter at Sutton's back. "I ain't sayin' what Jed Graham knows," Steve finally spoke. "I am sayin' though, hell's ridin' herd on this town and certain brands tonight. Graham's got the Association back of him this time. Reckon they'll be callin' brands and stretchin' rope on more than one killin' once this Association hombre hits town. Them's Hob's words."

Pete Sutton's pressed lips cracked in a leering grin. He glanced toward the runty little gunman at his side. The runty one bared his yellow teeth. "If that's what's rufflin' Hob's yellow feathers, reckon he needn't be losin' sleep. That Association skunk won't be botherin' more than his trail mate did. We know how to take care of nosey Cattlemen Detectives that come pokin' on to this range, eh, Scaldy?" Sutton grinned wide at the runty gunman Scaldy.

Steve felt his palms grow moist. He had never hoped for such a break. He would only have his own word as a witness's statement to Sutton's boast but that would be enough in the face of a vigilant court and jury. In as many words Sutton had cleared up his very purpose on this range.

He had admitted it was he and his gunman Scaldy that had shot down the first Association man that had disappeared so mysteriously along the trail into the Basin. Tonight he would be able to turn over to Jed Graham and his vigilantes information he had figured would take him days to gather. Information that would send the Independents into action at once.

The flush of success for an instant relaxed Steve from his tension. He did not see the sudden shift of the gunman Scaldy as his eyes lifted past the room's door. Did not see the sneak of his gun hand. Did not catch its draw, until, with poke of its muzzle into his ribs his own gun was jerked from its holster.

"Yuh lyin' snake!" Scaldy's voice hissed from his side. "Hob wouldn't be sendin' the likes of yuh, then trailin' yuh."

Scaldy's eyes shifted in a signal to Sutton. Barely beyond the doorway, a tall, swarthy skinned puncher paused to light a cigarette. His features were set. With a motion of his head he signaled Sutton. A quickly whispered word and he moved on toward the bar. Sutton whirled. His eyes fastened on Steve. A smoldering blaze seemed to burn behind them. They caught on the slight bulge of Steve's shirt pocket.

With a hooked finger, Sutton ripped the pocket open. A tightly folded envelope dropped into his hand. The bold letter-head of the Cattlemen's Association showed plain. With lips curling into a snarl, Sutton stared at Steve's official letter of identification.

"Yuh sneakin' coyot," Sutton blurted through pressed teeth. "Hob sent yuh, eh? Well, Hob's namin' yuh, too and I'm . . ."

Sutton's hand dropped to his gun. The weapon jerked clear of its holster. Steve steeled himself for lead. It never came. From beyond the room door the jumbled drag of spur rowels lifted above the queer quiet. A shadow formed in the doorway. A calm voice lifted in the stillness.

"We'll be takin' charge here, Sutton," the voice drawled. "Sorta keep yuhr hands clear hips, gents. This is no social call."

Steve's eyes shifted toward the door. Three men, guns in hands, blocked the room entrance. Beyond, the bar was lined with men, all with hands above heads. They stared across at a commanding line of set faced men, each gun in hand. A commanding silence covered all.

"I . . . I don't get yuh, Jed," Pete Sutton was forcing himself to speak. "Me an' my men ain't courtin' gun play."

"We ain't aimin' to have it neither, Sutton," the man Jed spoke in reply. "This range is wipin' itself clear of that sort tonight. Yonder at the hitching rack there's a sweat-streaked sorrel, plenty loaded with trail dust. It's a Bar 7 horse, Sutton. One of yuhr men rode it in a bit ago. We want that man."

Steve felt himself warm with the spoken identification to the Bar 7 animal he had rode into town. His lifted arms dropped as he stepped forward. Evidently the Independents had been on the lookout for him. In some way they had recognized him riding into town and seeing him enter Sutton's stronghold, decided on quick action.

"Reckon I'm the man yuh want," Steve spoke as he made to step forward. "I rode that sweat-streaked sorrel into . . ."

The cold fish-like stare above the gun muzzles in the doorway halted Steve's words. "Jest keep them hands high, stranger," Jed Graham's voice cut. "Before yuh get so anxious to talk, better listen a piece. We want the rider of that sorrel yonder at the rack, fer the killin' of a Tipped T rider over in Dry Coulee and fer the killin' of an Association man up on the rim.

"That killin' trail is still hours old, stranger. One of my trackers saw the gun play. Spotted that Bar 7 horse and its rider through a range glass, an' with the rest of us, tracked it to the racks yonder. There's a crowd of us over at the O.K. stables, stranger, waitin' to hear what the rider of that Bar 7 animal's got to say. You might be savin' yuhr words fer them."

Inwardly, Steve chuckled. Even Jed Graham and his trackers had been fooled by his ruse at the coulee rim. Evidently, his play had been perfect. Steve's lips cracked into an easy grin. There was no purpose in longer withholding his identity. He faced the group in the doorway to speak. A blasted curse from Sutton held him.

"The mangy skunk!" Pete Sutton roared. "I was jest callin' his hand on that play when yuh come in, Jed. Look."

Pete Sutton pushed out the letter he had ripped from Steve's pocket a minute before. "This squirmin' sidewinder come to me with this a few minutes back an' claims he's an Association man. Then he says, less I fork over a thousand gold, he'll go to some vigilante committee you Independents is supposed to be organizin' and tell 'em lies enough to have them an' the whole range ridin' herd on my outfit. The murderin' snake, must've pot-sot that Association man and skinned him of his papers. I leave it to the boys. What was his ante, fellahs? A thousand gold or . . ."

A mumbled shout affirmed Pete Sutton's wave to his men. Steve barely heard. His hazard of the moment was forgotten as from the corner of his

eye he caught a flashed signal from Sutton to his runty gunman, Scaldy. As quickly the man Scaldy allowed himself to be eclipsed by the shifting men about. Steve attempted to follow his sneaking maneuver. The sudden grip of hands to his arms, awakened him to the muttering buzz about. Pete Sutton was waving his arms and holding the room's attention as he talked.

"I been gettin' blamed fer every killin' on this range, Jed," Sutton was shouting. "I'm sayin' my outfit's as much against these border drifters shootin' up our peacefulness as any youse. If yuhr men trailed this snake here from a killin' back at Dry Coulee, I say, shake out a rope. I'll do my pullin' on the same end the rest yuhs."

Steve snapped alert to Sutton's attempt. Under ordinary circumstances he could easily establish his identity verbally. With whip of these Independents into any kind of a mob pitch, it would not be so easy. Not with the smoothness of Sutton's accusation.

Steve attempted to make himself heard to Jed Graham. The grizzly cattleman had already made his decision. "Yuh'll get yuhr chance at words, stranger," he barked at Steve. "Take 'em over to the stable boys. Yuh, Sutton, we won't be needin' yuh for this. Yuh intent, peaceful as yuh words, yuh'll be holdin' yuhr men inside here till things is over. Least, that's my advice to yuh."

Jed Graham gave a nodding signal. Steve was pushed forward. In the bar room a line of gun muzzles pointed the way. Through the door and in the street more men joined to form his escort. As the Independents inside the saloon withdrew to join those in the street, they closed in to trail Steve and his guard at either arm. Jed Graham's voice shouted their goal, the O.K. stables, a block away.

Steve's brain jarred alert with every step. Sutton had planted his charge well but had seemed overanxious that

they take him to his trial at the Vigilant court room within the stables. That signal he had flashed his runty gunman Scaldy must have had a meaning. The little killer had responded to it like a trigger pull.

They were just rounding the corner to swing up a dark street, where ahead the gloomy entrance to the O.K. stables beckoned. As they turned the corner, Steve caught a glimpse of a hurrying form dart back into the black shadow of the wide open wagon lot adjoining the stable building and disappear. Steve needed no second glance to identify that darting form. It was runty, bend-shouldered Scaldy. His leap back into the darkness flashed a meaning through Steve's brain. The reception both Scaldy and Sutton had mentioned so mysteriously, back at the coulee rim. The reception that awaited Jed Graham and his Independents. Steve halted in his tracks.

They were almost to the wide-doored stable entrance. Inside a dozen men gathered beneath the lantern light. Steve grasped the moment's pause to whirl about. Jed Graham had been trailing them a pace arrear.

"Graham, yuh blast fool," Steve roared as he struggled to hold himself from being pushed along. "Sutton's trickin' yuh into some kind-a trap, I tell yuh. I saw him signal that runty handy-man of his while he covered up with talk. They're plannin' some kind-a trick. This looks like the set off. I just saw Sutton's gunman Scaldy dive there into the dark past the wagon lot. He . . ."

Jed Graham had squared himself to the bite of Steve's opening hail. However, without command, a couple of the Independents moved on past the stable wall to where Steve pointed. One of them paused to peer beyond the building wall into the darkness of the wagon lot. His wild, warning cry drowned Jed Graham's growl.

"Dynamite! Dynamite!" shrieked the warning scream. "Run fer it, fellahs! She's all set."

The warning shout was as an explosion itself. Men bolted from the stable door. The crowd at Steve's back whirled as a man to race in either direction. Steve felt the grip to his either arm release. With a leap he bounded ahead. No one grabbed at him. Beyond loomed the wagon lot blackness. A dozen paces and he was alongside the stable wall. The hiss of a burning fuse caught his ear. A dull glow emitted from almost at his feet. Steve reached down, grabbed and jerked. The hissing fuse came free. It had burned to within a half minute of its capped end.

Steve was dragging a box of dynamite from beneath the stable floor as his shouts brought forward the first Independent. He talked fast. The men about listened willingly. Quickly two of them were dispatched with the dynamite and now extinguished fuse, on past the wagon lot to the empty ground beyond. The rest gathered about Steve for a moment's instructions, then began to scatter. Into every doorway and behind every corner they took their positions. Minutes, and front and rear, the saloon midway Dog Trot's single street was surrounded. In tense silence all waited.

Suddenly, from out of the night's blackness came a thundering roar. The night flashed red. The echoing rumble was as a signal. Out of the saloon doors, front and rear, poured Pete Sutton and his band of hired killers. A warning shout attempted to halt them. Sutton's answer was the blast of his six gun toward the warning voice.

"Come on, men," his bellowed shout carried. "They're all blown to hell now. What's left we'll put there."

The belch of gun muzzles drowned Sutton's threat. From every side it came. From every blot of blackness it flashed. Pete Sutton was the first

to go down. His runty handy-man followed. After that it was a mad scramble. The Independents had set themselves too secure. They had turned Sutton's reception into one of their own.

Hours later, beneath the blinking lantern light of the O.K. stables, Steve prepared to again hit trail. His own horse had been brought in by the tracker from the coulee rim and Steve had just put the animal through a dozen showy tricks. For the twentieth time he had explained the happening back at the coulee rim and how he came to ride into Sutton's nest. For the twentieth time he had refused the invitation to light and stay awhile, the last from old Jed Graham himself.

"With all the doin's that snake Hob Steward up and confesses to," old Jed was speakin, "I sure feel right ashamed fer ever doubtin' yuh. But dang it, stranger, old age must be sure creepin' up on me and my eyesight. When I furst layed eyes on yuh tonight I'd bet my chuck wagon outfit against one of its tracks yuh was a gun packin' horse-thief I had a run-in with once when I was trailin' a herd north. Danged if his name weren't Steve, too. Steve . . . Steve . . . well, makes no difference. Must've been imagination."

Steve swung into his saddle. His lips toyed with a grin. "Peers I heard tell about that hombre," he called down. "He had a weakness fer a trick horse, too. Ain't heard about him lately though. Reckon he must've burnt out his wildness and kind-a settled down."

The whirl of Steve's mount kicked dust in the air. Like a flash the animal raced past the stable dimness into the darkness. The pound of horse hoofs faded. In the stable doorway Jed Graham still stroked his chin meditatively. "Must've," Jed mumbled half aloud. "Sure must've." The pound of horse hoofs drifted quiet. Jed still stroked his chin.



BAD BILL ROBERTS

Bill Roberts come to Blazer's Mill a-ridin' on a mule—
Bill Roberts, joke of all the range,
the Lincoln County fool;
A simpleton an' coward. Many a cowboy'd
had his fun
A-teasin' pore Bill Roberts an' a-takin' off
his gun.

Dick Brewer an' his posse set at chuck, a
merry crew,

Who hadn't ketched no outlaws as they'd set out so to do.
"We've got to git *somebody*," spoke up Billy, called the Kid,
When in rushed ol' Jack Ryan: "Boys, you better all git hid!
A dangerous hombre's comin'!" When they looked out then an' saw
Bill Roberts on his lousy mule, they raised a big haw-haw.

"So that's your dangerous hombre!" Charlie Bowdre's grin was wide.
"Let's make out to arrest him jest to skeer him frum his hide!"
The plot was laid with snickers. "Howdy, Bill!" they greeted him;
"I've got a warrant for you, Bill," said Ryan, lookin' grim.
"I ain't done nothin', fellers," whined pore Roberts, "lemme be!"
Then up jumped Charlie Bowdre: "Throw yer hands up, Bill!" cried he.

Oh, Charlie drawed his sixgun, an' he waved it in the air,
An' all of them got ready fer to laugh at pore Bill's scare.
Bill Roberts' face got white like death, an' fear stood in his eyes,
But his hand went to his sixgun, 'stid of reachin' fer the skies.
"I ain't done nothin', boys," he gulped. His gun spoke sharp an' loud.
Through Bowdre's sixgun holster the sudden bullet plowed.

An' as he felt it graze him, Bowdre's trigger finger jumped,
An' into pore Bill's middle flew the slug of lead he pumped.
"My God!" cried Brewer. "Drop them guns! We meant this jest in fun!"
"I'm jest a joke myself," gasps Bill, "afeered to draw a gun!
My whole damn life, I reckon, I've done played the coward's part,
But now—" The bullet from his gun sped straight through Brewer's heart.

The others jumped to safety back of thick
adobe walls.
"He's mortal hit!" said Ryan. "We'll jest
wait until he falls!"
They waited full two hours, then a posse
man stepped out;
Dead through his head a bullet sped from
pore Bill's sixgun snout.

Bill Roberts come to Blazer's Mill. He
never left again,
But two lay dead there with him of these
jokesome posse men.
The joke of all the range he'd been, to
every man in boots—
A coward! Boys, there's hell to pay when
such a coward shoots!

—S. OMAR BARKER.





Firing as he backed away, he drew the killers through the door with the light behind them.

To appreciate the holsterless thighs of Rawhide Preston, one must go back twenty years to the day he killed his friend and hung up his guns for all time. Now a killing by an Arizona sheriff, in old territorial days, was of small moment. Hell and boot-hills were filling in those times with gunmen who had crossed the law and been found wanting. Their names,

like their epitaphs, have become lost in the parade of the years. But not so the name of Scorp O'Shea . . . a cowland tradition.

Cottonwood folks will show you Scorp's grave and tell you the yarn of his passing. They will point out Rawhide Preston, not as their perennial sheriff, not as one of the biggest cowmen thereabouts, not as a leading citizen, but as the man who

OUTLAW BRAND

COMPLETE NOVELETTE

By
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*The Sheriff's Guns Were Silent Since
Stained by the Blood of His Friend.
When That Dead Gunman's Ghost
Appeared, Old Hates Awakened to
Breed New Loyalties in Powder Smoke.*



twenty years before shot his friend, Scorp O'Shea—the handsome, swash-buckling ramrod of the Hashknife, a gun-toting son of the old West.

That Rawhide was justified, makes the lingering memory all the more remarkable, in a country where gun violence had been the rule, where a gunman's fame was short-lived whether he died with boots on or off, where men were wont to sing:

*"... he chanced one day to run
ag'in'
A bullet made uh lead,
Some harder than he figgered on,
An' now he's awful dead;
An' when they fetched his body
home,
No salty tears was shed . . ."*

No salty tears were shed for Scorp O'Shea, in Cottonwood at least. But

the gun-smoke of his passing still eddied about the rafters of the Territory Bar, still stung the nostrils of the grizzled oldsters who patronized that saloon, who liked to be called Cottonwood pioneers.

So it is not surprising that those same saddle-warped oldtimers should stare in speechless amazement at the stranger who quietly entered the Territory Bar and stood looking at them—not a dozen feet from where Scorp O'Shea had bled away his life, twenty years before.

He was tall, well-made, lean of flank and wide of shoulder. Handsome as any rangerman of twenty-three or four can be. Sporting a taunting, dare-devil smile these oldtimers had seen before—twenty years before. This youngster was the deadpan image of the Scorp O'Shea they had known. Hell, this was Scorp O'Shea—or his ghost!

He came forward with the same catlike ease that had been Scorp's, easing the pull of a heavy gun belt, smiling around. His lips parted . . .

"Howdy, gents."

Even the voice was Scorp's. Del Donlin, saloonman and one-time wagon boss, gulped, found his voice.

"H'are yuh, stranger?" he said weakly. "House buys. What'll yores be?"

The youngster stepped up, laughing softly. "Thanks! I'll take sa'sparilla. I've rid far an' the road was dusty."

There was a swift exchange of glances. Surely this wasn't even Scorp's ghost. Scorp would have scorned anything between whiskey to drink and water to wash in. Del Donlin gasped.

"You mean . . ." unbelievably, ". . . that yo're orderin' bellywash?"

"Why not? It's all rot-gut. Nothin' like clear mountain water to cool a thirst. But I know you ain't got that down here in the alkali."

Drinks were sloppily poured. They

couldn't take their eyes off him. While no one would have breached range etiquette by asking his name, they were eaten up with curiosity . . . and uneasiness. Donlin lifted his glass.

"Mud in yore eyes, boys!"

They drank. The stranger set his glass down, smacked his lips.

"I'm lookin'," he volunteered, "fer a feller name uh Rawhide Preston!"

Silence fell, thick and vibrant. Del Donlin broke it.

"Lookin' fer him? Such as how, stranger?"

The newcomer smiled. "A personal matter between him an' me. Business that's needed doin' a long time now. An' pleasure, fer one of us at least."

His cool statement didn't surprise them. Indeed, it only clinched the fear that had bloomed in their hearts at sight of him. After twenty years, the uneasy ghost of Scorp O'Shea was about to take its vengeance. And with Old Rawhide gunless these twenty years. A wave of pity swept these oldtimers, pity for the grizzled sheriff of Cottonwood, whose past had caught up to him. Del Donlin was voicing a warning . . .

"Business an' pleasure, eh? Pleasure's where you find it, stranger, an' hell's filled with trigger-tricky jaspers who looked fer it where it wasn't. You'll find Rawhide Preston at the Ladder P—three mile up the crick. Don't look fer yore pleasure with him. Feller name uh Scorp O'Shea tried that twenty year ago an' we put lilies on his chest."

If, in mentioning that old killing, Donlin expected to get a rise out of the young stranger, he failed utterly. The man never batted an eye. No shadow of fear or hate clouded his straight-gazing gray eyes or dulled his infectious smile.

"Funny," he murmured. "I've bin out to the Ladder P an' the cook told me he was in town. I've looked in the sheriff's office. It was empty."

"You missed him," lied Del Donlin.

The youngster nodded. "Thanks, gents. I'll git him. There's no hurry, long as this business has waited. If you see him before I do . . ." his white teeth glistened ". . . tell him Matt O'Shea is lookin' fer him."

He turned and strode out, his spurs chiming bravely. When he was gone, a sigh ran through the room and men moved to the windows to watch him ride away, leading a mouse-colored pack mule. The man even rode like Scorp O'Shea.

Matt O'Shea! Scorp had never boasted of a family, but that wasn't surprising, because he had been notoriously reticent concerning his past. But the oldtimers in the Territory Bar would have given you long odds that here was Scorp's son, that he had come back to finish what his dad had so nearly accomplished years before—the killing of Rawhide Preston. Still . . . this O'Shea drank bellywash!

They were still staring after the vanished rider, wondering, dreaming, when the rear door creaked open. A lank-bodied, weathered oldster entered, stood there regarding their unwanted reserve. Seamed, bowlegged, slowed by years of hardship and exposure, he looked exactly what he was—a cowman, from Stetson to spurs. Only the tarnished star that peeked from beneath the lapel of his black coat hinted that this cowman was the sheriff—Rawhide Preston.

The steel-dust eyes, beneath brows that were yet black, still revealed the tragic moment that had broken him, that had gnawed at his soul for twenty years. Yet his smile at these cronies of his was like the sun breaking from behind dark clouds. His voice, as he hailed them, was as brittle as his bones had become . . .

"Hullo, you bar-fly cow servants. Cookin' up no good to some pore feller, I betcha."

For moments no one answered. They were seeing him as he had en-

tered that way twenty years before in the evening dusk and shot Scorp O'Shea to death. It seemed like yesterday . . .

Rawhide, so named for his whang toughness, hadn't been sheriff long then. But long enough to serve notice upon the lawless. He had gone out to the Ladder P that fateful afternoon the Mogollon Kid and his rustlers came to town. Rawhide wasn't there to hear the Kid's drunken blaspheming of the law in general and the new sheriff in particular. But Rawhide's friend was. Scorp O'Shea was eating at the American Kitchen with two of his Hashknife riders when word reached him. Some say that bad blood between the Hashknife and the rustlers prompted him to take it up. Others maintain it was purely a matter of friendship. *Quien sabe?* He and his men repaired to the Territory Bar.

Scorp came in shooting, after the reckless manner he had ordered his life. Taken by surprise, the rustlers gunned the lights and staged a finish scrap of it in the dark. Someone raced to fetch Rawhide. Just before the sheriff stepped into the Territory Bar to let light on the spectacle, the last gun sounded.

Scorp stood at the bar, a trickle of blood dyeing his grinning face. His two punchers were dead. Three of the rustler band were finished, the rest gone—out the rear. Mogollon himself sat slumped in a chair, pale and bloody, a pink froth tinting his lips. The weakness of death was upon him.

A crowd, attracted by the gunfire, came roaring into the saloon. From under the bar came a frightened tender to tell how it had happened. Scorp O'Shea said never a word as he poured a drink and tossed it off. Rawhide Preston walked up to him.

"Sometime, feller," he said, not unkindly, "you'll learn to call on the law in matters uh this kind. If this was anybody but Mogollon, I'd be forced to jail my best friend."

Scorp scoffed. "I did call on the law, Rawhide," he said, patting his holster. "All the law I need. What we waitin' on? Where do we hang this rustlin' rat?"

Rawhide shook his head. "Not that, Scorp. He goes to bed fer a patchin', then to trial fer his crimes. One of you fellers go fer Doc."

His face a sneering mask, Scorp strode to the Mogollon Kid, lifted his dazed, pain-racked face.

"You've rustled yore last cow, Muggycown. If you know any prayers, start mumblin' 'em. 'Cause in five minutes you'll be dancin' the ol' sky mazurka . . ."

Rawhide stepped between them, struck Scorp's hand down. His eyes were icy points.

"Take yore paws off'n him, feller. He's mine, an' don't you fer one split second fergit it."

Scorp laughed, faced the crowd.

"How about it, boys? We lettin' this cow thief git off through some slick shyster paid with renegade money?"

The virus of mob psychology is insidious. And Scorp O'Shea was a natural leader of men. They took up his challenge.

"Hang 'im!" lifted the cry. "String 'im up! H'ist the damn rustler!"

There was a rush forward. Rawhide jerked his Colt. Scorp hurled himself upon the sheriff, striving to pinion his arms, misjudging entirely Rawhide's temper and zealous adherence to his oath. The weapon's crash was muffled against Scorp's body. Hurled back, fatally injured, that fighting fool smiled and drew, shot the lawman as he fell. When the smoke lifted, they lay side by side on the saloon floor.

Awed by the swift moving tragedy, the crowd forgot its lust. The doctor came. Scorp was dead, Rawhide desperately wounded. The Mogollon Kid sat with his head on a table, sleepin' the last long sleep.

Rawhide got well. But during long

days in bed, he mourned continually, moaning over and over: "I kilt my best friend fer a snake that was heaps better off hung."

Nor was that bitterness soon to pass. The law vindicated him, but the grim spectre of his act hung to him like a burr to a pony's tail, eatin' into his heart and brain like a numbing poison. Leaving him more silent, grimmer, a lot older and, from that fatal moment, unencumbered by guns.

Those were the pictures the old-timers in the Territory saw as they looked at this grayer, older Rawhide Preston.

"Come on," he was saying. "Fess up. Who you cookin' up a mess uh hell fer now?"

Del Donlin shifted uneasily.

"We wouldn't plan nothin', Rawhide, that wasn't fer yore best interests. Kin you believe that?"

"Uh course." Rawhide frowned, stirred by their strange demeanor. "Why? What's eatin' you hairpins?"

"Sometimes," brooded the saloon-man, "a feller's past ketches up with him. Yores has. You've got two outs. You kin run like hell or do the braver thing an' belt on yore old cutter, knowin' we'll back any play you make."

Rawhide smiled wearily. "You talk loco, feller. I'm too stove up to learn runnin' at my age. An' as fer packin' a gun . . ." he shook his head. "Gun totin' is like poker . . . up to a certain point. You bluff that you've filled yore straight, the other feller lays 'em down, an' you win the pot without jerkin' a trigger. But if he's mule-eared an' won't bluff . . . then it ain't poker no more. It's hell! You win the pot mebby, but still you lose. Wakin' an' sleepin', you'll never forget you've kilt a man. It'll torture yore soul. You can't wipe it off'n yore conscience . . . even with likker. 'Cause when you sober up, there it'll be, grinnin' at yuh. So you'll drink some more an' finally die, wonderin' how you'll square the account in the

Shadow Range. That's what beltin' on guns does, fellers. Take it from one who knows. What's wrong?"

"Plenty," spat Del Donlin. "A feller just left here . . . headin' God knows where. He'd bin out to the Ladder P. Name uh Matt O'Shea! Said he was lookin' fer you to settle business a long time overdue. Somethin' he'd take a heap uh pleasure in settlin'."

Rawhide flinched, as from a blow. His eyes burned; his fingers flexed. Purple veins stood out at his temples as he peered down the backtrail of the years. Then he relaxed.

"Me an' troubles," he said brittly, "is like a dog an' fleas. I can't sleep good without 'em. I reckon I'll be ready fer this O'Shea, when the time comes . . . an' without runnin' or beltin' on no pistols."

He turned abruptly and left the barroom, unmindful of their pitying stares. They knew how he would be ready. Just as a sick man is ready for a dose of bitter medicine. Only in this case the medicine would be lead—to cure the canker of a twenty year pain.

CHAPTER II

"BUST AN' BE DAMNED!"

Thoughtful, slumped in the saddle, Rawhide Preston rode up Cottonwood Creek toward his Ladder P. But before reaching it, he cut to the left, following a twisting trail into the hills. Now he took a switchback trail out of a narrow gulch and topped Juniper Dome—a broad eminence falling away on four sides and affording a rare view of the Cottonwood and the mountains beyond.

Easing the cinch on his blowing pony, the old sheriff sat down and twisted a smoke. His fingers trembled as he poured the leaf and there was a hopeless, beaten look in his faded eyes. As the sweet smoke bathed his lungs, he stared reverently across this rangeland that he loved. Here often

he had come to be alone, to fight the devils of despondency. He wondered if this would be his last trip.

Yonder lay the Ladder P. In that green motte of cottonwoods, that he had planted years before, snuggled his weathered clapboard house—a house terribly barren of late in its loneliness. Rawhide had never married. The cares of the Ladder P and of sherrifing for Cottonwood folks had left him too busy to go courting. But lately, oppressed by the emptiness of his life, he had caught himself staring after Cottonwood youngsters, wondering why it is given some folks to delight in the ownership of kids, while others . . .

Beyond the Ladder P, he could see the 29 Bar—a smaller spread owned by one, Rimrock Rogers, long since become too decrepit to run the outfit and gone to live with a sister in Tucson. Still farther up the Cottonwood lay the big Circle Dart, the answer to most of Cottonwood's range troubles.

Watching the play of his cigarette smoke in the wind, Rawhide thought of Quirt Younger, who had established the Circle Dart two years before, with land script to two sections, a dozen armed riders, a thousand head of wet cattle and a white-handled gun decorated with four significant notches. Gun toting on the Cottonwood was common then, still was. But no one, outside of this tall, darkly handsome cowman, flaunted such a flagrant invitation to trouble. Rawhide had plenty reason to remember Quirt. Likewise to hate him.

"Quirt Younger," he murmured grimly. "As bad a cowthief as a feller kin find in a week's travelin' . . . an' that takes in a heap uh snaky folks, I'll tell a man."

A movement down the hill slope caught his eye. He stiffened.

"Speakin' of the devil," he muttered, "an' danged if he don't pop up. Now, where at is he headed?"

He wasn't kept long in doubt. Quirt Younger, splendidly propor-

tioned, riding with easy grace, led the way up to Juniper Dome. Behind him rode an older, awkward man in dude riding clothes. They came on leisurely, following the beaten trail. Now they hopped out and Younger's exclamation lifted at sight of Rawhide.

"Well . . . look what the wind blew in. H'are yuh, Rawhide? Didn't expect to find our sheriff coolin' his heels up here . . . on the people's time. Meet Mister Steele, Rawhide . . . Justin Steele, of Boston. Mister Steele, cross palms with my neighbor, Sheriff Preston."

The Easterner climbed stiffly off his horse, came forward smiling. Ridiculous as was his choice of range attire, there was nothing ridiculous in the cut of his jaw or the blaze of his blue eyes. Straight and lean and granite-like as Rawhide himself, the man shot out a friendly hand.

"An honor to know yuh, Sheriff," he said sincerely. "It's pioneers like yourself who tamed this land with their guns that we later comers are indebted to. I repeat, it's an honor."

Wincing at the mention of guns, Rawhide merely nodded as he shook hands. Nor was there courtesy in his silence. Cow country men are habitually silent before strangers. Steele eyed the far-flung panorama, his breath coming faster.

"What a view," he exclaimed. "I've never been one to waste time in contemplation, Sheriff, but this . . . this . . ." He flung his hand. "No wonder you come up here to look at this."

"I come up here to be alone," rumbled Rawhide, moving toward his horse.

"Wait a minute, Rawhide," protested Quirt Younger. "Mister Steele's got a proposition . . . one you can't afford to pass up." Rawhide faced about and Younger went on: "It's about yore Ladder P outfit."

"What about it?" snapped Rawhide. Steele smiled. "I suppose you've

heard of me, Sheriff. I'm the man who bought the Buckskin Copper Mine and built the Arizona Southern narrow gauge into the Cottonwood. Recently I've purchased a half interest in the Circle Dart—with Mister Younger. I've also bought the 29 Bar. With the proper range, I see profit in cattle here. I need your ranch and I'll take it off your hands at a nice figure."

"You say," scowled Rawhide, "you've bought the 29 Bar? Rimrock Rogers took as much devilin' from the Circle Dart as I did, an' hated 'em worse, I reckon. Funny he'd sell out to 'em."

Steele shot Younger a quizzical glance.

"Rogers ain't got no just complaint ag'in' the Circle Dart," Quirt growled.

"Rimrock Rogers is old," explained Justin Steele, "and unable to run his ranch. His hired men don't take the proper interest. I've made him so good an offer he cannot refuse it."

"Then you ain't bought it?" Rawhide asked acridly.

"No . . . not exactly, but . . ."

"Then you lied when you said you'd bought it?" Square as a die, Rawhide was relentless. "An' if I know ol' Rimrock, after livin' beside him fer twenty-five years, you won't get it. Me—I'm satisfied with the Ladder P. Why should I sell it to you . . . an' Quirt Younger here?"

Justin Steele shrugged away his annoyance. "I wouldn't say that I had lied, Sheriff. I'm sure to get the 29 Bar in the end. And I'll tell you why I want you to sell out. I'm acquiring large interests in the Cottonwood. I'm going into cattle seriously. As a good business man, I'm looking to the sheriff for protection against lawlessness. You can never do the kind of a job I want if you're spread out too thin in cattle. I begin to rate some political influence and propose having the kind of sheriff I need. Do I make myself clear?"

Rawhide nodded grimly. "Either I sell or you get my job, eh?"

"That's guessin' close, Rawhide," grinned Quirt Younger.

"Just a matter of business, Preston," added Justin Steele. "Personalities don't count with me. You get your equity out of the Ladder P. I get the range I want and a sheriff with time to protect my interests. What do you say?"

"I say this!" spat Rawhide. "I've done my sheriffin' as I seen it. Cottonwood's bin cleaner's most. I've did an honest job an' run the Ladder P on the side. Mebby if I'd reversed it, some folks wouldn't uh stole so many of my cattle." He flung a look at Younger. "My roots is down deep in both jobs, gents, too deep to be yanked up. I'll play out the hand as dealt."

Steele showed disappointment. "You'll regret that decision, Preston."

"We'll bust yuh, Rawhide!" flamed Quirt Younger. "We'll own both the Ladder P an' the 29 Bar, whether you like it or not!"

"Mebbyso," said Rawhide tightly, "an' mebbyso not. Bust an' be damned to yuh! When I sell the Ladder P, it'll be to no snake, even if he's pardnerin' with a white man. Now you two better drag it an' leave me alone."

Cursing audibly, Quirt rose to the saddle. "C'mon, Mister Steele," he choked. "Leave the ol' jackass to his whuppin'."

But the capitalist tried again.

"Among my investments here, Sheriff," he said kindly, "is your note to the Cottonwood State Bank, secured by the Ladder P. It falls due in ninety days. With the declining beef market, you'll be hard pressed to meet it. I will not be interested in renewing. If you change your mind about selling, let me know."

He climbed into the saddle. Rawhide watched them ride down the trail, a beaten look growing in his eyes. He had counted on his old friend, the banker, to renew that note. Now it shore looked like Quirt would make his brags good.

He had lost cattle continually despite a line fence he had thrown up between himself and the Circle Dart. Small losses, but bulking big over the years. Losses that he knew were drifted back into the fastnesses of the Hanging Hills, where they apparently vanished. His steer gather would be mighty slim this fall and the price low. It looked like Quirt had won—with the help of Justin Steele. Oh, well . . . Rawhide felt suddenly very old and very weary of it all.

He had kept up his insurance, enough to clear his outfit. He'd look up this blood sweatin' Matt O'Shea, have it over and leave a will, passing the Ladder P over to those stove-up, has-was cow nurses that hung out at the Territory Bar—old cronies who wore the seats out of their britches playin' euchre an', seven-up, whose range ridin' for a good many years had been done along a bar or around a pot-bellied stove.

Pleased with the idea, Rawhide chuckled as he rose. He was licked mebby, but he'd eat crow for no man. Stretching, he squinted at the sun to calculate the time, then rocked to his horse. As he rode down the trail, he laughed softly.

"If Quirt only knowed," he muttered, after the manner of so many oldtimers who auger things out with themselves, "what a knot this Matt O'Shea is goin' to tie in his tail, he'd beller an' paw dirt aplenty. Scorp, ol' trapper, yore whelp promises to square a lot uh things before many moons has waned."

Rawhide spoke truer than he knew, though not in just the way he meant it. For Matt O'Shea was even then twisting Quirt Younger's tail.

CHAPTER III

AT THE 29 BAR

From Cottonwood, Matt O'Shea rode out the creek road and, for the second time that day, came to the Ladder P. This time he went right on past, pointing for the 29

Bar, beyond. He drew rein finally in the dooryard of the little adobe house Rimrock Rogers had built years ago.

Disregarding the rude sign, "NO TRESPASSERS — THIS MEANS YOU," he swung down and moved to the door that gaped open. No one was about. Inside was a table littered with dirty dishes and odds and ends of food. The place was filthy, reeking of untidiness and misuse.

Corral fences were in disrepair. The barn was empty of hay. A windmill squealed plaintively for grease and two thirsty ponies nickered from a round pen. Matt turned them out so they could get to the trough, unpacked his mule and turned it loose to roll. Then, watering his horse, he mounted and took the plain trail leading to the 29 Bar hill range.

The farther he rode, the more he marveled. Here was lush grama range with little evidence of cattle to eat it. Higher up he came upon an old dehorned bull and three old cows. Not a calf or a steer did he see. Where were the two thousand cattle supposed to be ranging the 29 Bar?

Pausing where the trail crossed a rocky point, he swept the range with eyes cold and gray beneath the shadow of his hat brim. From afar came a prolonged and insistent bellowing. It drew him. Spurring, he climbed to a clump of piñon just under the rimrock.

Below him, on a sandy flat, three men worked a small bunch of cows with long-ear calves. Matt watched them quite a while before he rode down. A hulking, flat-nosed rider loped around the cattle to meet him, his eyes hawk-like and unfriendly, his brows screwed down with suspicion.

"Who the hell are you?" he spat, curbing cruelly.

"Me?" chuckled Matt. "Oh, I'm just a pore . . ."

"How'd you git in here?"

"Foltered the river an' up the hill," hummed Matt, his eyes asparkle.

"Past the house?"

"Past a hawg sty that might uh bin a house once."

"Yo're trespassin'!" snarled the big rider. "Can't yuh read?"

"What if I can?" asked Matt, going icy.

"In that case," snarled the big man, "you got it comin'."

He spurred in close and swung his doubled rope. Matt ducked, took the flailing loops on the shoulders, shot out his hand and fastened onto the slack of the man's shirt. He quit his pony, dragging the man down. They hit dirt together, slugging, struggling.

They broke apart and came up, facing each other. As the bully rushed, Matt braced himself, conscious that the other two riders were sitting quietly, certain of their ramrod's ability to flatten the stranger.

Matt gave before the charge, his blows straight-flung, short, powerful. The big man lumbered after him, swinging with ferocious awkwardness. As Matt ducked under his burly arms, the 29 Bar man whirled, shot his hand to his gun. Matt leaped, fastened to his hand, spun, ducked and heaved. The big man described an arc and crashed, roaring with pain. The gun spun away. Matt straightened, glared down.

"Get up!" he commanded. "You started this, now le's see can you finish the job."

The man reared up, came at Matt with lowered head and wind-milling fists. Matt straightened him up with an uppercut, stepped aside and cracked the man behind the ear as he flashed past. As the man whirled, spewing agonized curses, Matt nailed him on the chin and hammered him to his knees with a flurry of stinging punches. Blood spurted from the man's nose and smashed lips as he rose and swayed dizzily toward his elusive foe. Matt weaved, measured him, lifted a clean shot from his bootstraps. It crashed off the chin, drop-

ping the man like a gunned beef. He moaned and lay still.

The two cowboys had ridden around to watch it, allowing the cattle to scatter. They eyed the victor nervously, apprehensive, ready for most anything. Matt wiped sweat and grinned at them.

"If you've got ary objection," he puffed, "I'd admire to have you express yoreself about it."

"Let it ride," muttered one, unpleasantly. "If I don't like it, I'll express myself . . . but not with knuckles."

But the other one rode close. "I'm satisfied," he grinned. "I know science when I see it an' ain't hankerin' fer none. It was all fair an' square. If anybody doubts yore ability, refer 'em to Rance Martin—same bein' me."

Matt hardly heard him. His eyes were taking in the 29 Bar on the ribs of those running cows and the Circle Dart on the flank of the tied calf.

"How come?" he asked pointedly. "Plasterin' Circle Dart on a 29 Bar dogie?"

Rance flushed. "I ain't paid tuh notice them things, stranger. When my boss hollers, I foller orders."

"Who's the boss?"

"Him that you knocked out. Lon Beadle."

"If he told you to go to the Big House fer a rap, I suppose you'd still foller orders, eh? That may be what it amounts to. From here out, I'm roddin' the 29 Bar! Lon Beadle is fired; so are you two. If yo're wise, you'll stir a lot uh dust 'cause yore Circle Dart boss will likely deny knowin' yuh an' help to send yuh over . . ."

Lon Beadle, rising painfully, snarled as he wiped blood from his face. "Fired, eh? Who says so?"

"I do!"

"An' yo're . . .?"

"Matt O'Shea, new owner of the 29 Bar!"

The man gulped. "Owner of the . . .? Yuh lie! Justin Steele owns

the 29 Bar! Just bought it from Rimrock Rogers. I don't savvy yore play, O'Shea, but when the Circle Dart gits word uh this, you better be hard tuh ketch."

He walked over and picked up his gun, Matt watching him like a hawk. But the fellow had no more fight left in his neck. He sheathed his weapon, mounted and leered down at Matt.

"If you own this hen-yard spread, how about payin' us off?"

"You ain't got any pay comin'," grinned Matt, "but I'll pay you at the Territory Bar, tomorrow evenin'."

They rode away. Matt watched them lope to the ranch, gather their plunder and then head for the Circle Dart. Matt's mouth was grim as he rode down to the ranch house. A storm was gathering about his head and he hadn't the slightest idea how he had best combat it. But, never one to cross bridges before reaching them, he was whistling as he off-saddled and turned his pony loose to graze.

Inside the cabin was an all afternoon job mucking out. When he had finished that unsavory chore, Matt drew a paper from his pocket, read it carefully, measured off bricks from the door to the right and from the floor up. With his knife, he loosened a thin mud chinking and dislodged a brick. From the hole he drew a tin can. Inside the can was a roll of hundred dollar bills. Matt grinned and pocketed the money just as two riders swept into the dooryard. Quirt Younger he recognized from previous description. The other man, a tenderfoot of middle age, he didn't know.

"H'are yuh, gents?" he greeted, stepping outside. "Lookin' fer someone?"

"Who are you?" asked Younger uncivilly. "Beadle's new man?"

He and Justin Steele had just come from their meeting with Rawhide Preston. He was in ugly temper. Matt overlooked his courtesy.

"I ain't nobody's man," he said stoutly. "Who might you be?"

"Quirt Younger!" came the answer. "Circle Dart boss. This is Justin Steele, my pardner. Good thing you didn't lie. Beadle ain't got no new man."

"Lyin'," grinned Matt, "ain't one of my specialties. As fer Beadle, he won't be needin' new men—or old. He's fired, an' his cow thieves with him."

"Who fired them?" piped up Justin Steele.

"Matt O'Shea, new owner of the 29 Bar! Same bein' me, gents."

They started, exchanged surprised looks.

"You mean," asked the capitalist, "Mister Rogers doesn't own the 29 Bar any more?"

"Rimrock Rogers is dead!" said Matt softly.

"Dead?" Justin Steele gulped. "Then . . . then how did you get this place?"

"That," grinned Matt, "happens to be none of yore business."

Quirt Younger sat back against his cantle, studying this new wrench in the machinery of his villainy. But Justin Steele flared with the anger of disappointment.

"Maybe you speak the truth, young man," he said severely, "but I doubt it. If it is your idea of a joke, the laugh will be on you, I promise. I can't believe Rogers is dead. But if he is, I cannot imagine a mere boy like you matching my fine offer for the 29 Bar. I propose to investigate."

"Investigations are all right in their place," broke in Younger. "But not here. This feller is runnin' a good strong bluff. But he looks too unhealthy to make it stick. I wouldn't wonder some fatal sickness will carry him off before an investigation could go places."

Matt laughed in his face. "I foller you, Younger. But the payoff on that may be like tryin' to look down the

back of yore neck. Don't outgame yore strength."

"Don't worry," Quirt smiled fiercely. "O'Shea, eh? Mebby so related to Scorp O'Shea?"

"He was my dad."

Younger winked at Steele. "Come into the Cottonwood to 'Pecos' the man who killed yore father. Mister Steele, this man is a killer, come here to notch off our sheriff. He'll bear a heap uh watchin'."

The capitalist glared at Matt. Deterred, nay fearing, lawlessness to the point of obsession, he paled and his mouth set rigidly.

"There's no place in the new Cottonwood for a killer, O'Shea," he said tightly. "But we want no trouble with you. Get out and we will forget we saw you. Stay, and I'll call you to an accounting. Loose reins breed runaways. In two days I'll swear out a warrant for your arrest, charging conspiracy to murder the sheriff. I've heard the tale. Don't let me find you here."

"In two days, Mister Steele," laughed Matt, mirthlessly, "you'll be so busy explainin' why so many 29 Bar cattle are wearin' Circle Dart brands, you won't have time to swear out warrants. Now you two are delayin' my supper. Yonder trespass sign wasn't put there to keep folks off the purty posies, nor to keep sheep from foulin' the spring, nor to mark a grave. No, *amigos*, not fer none uh them things. Clear out, an' don't come back. Hereafter Circle Dart runnin' irons on 29 Bar means gunsmoke."

Quirt Younger smiled as he touched his gun. And Matt decided he hated that white-toothed grimace beneath the trim black mustache. The Circle Dart boss flung up his hand.

"*Adios*, neighbor *mo*," he hummed. "Good luck an' sound sleepin'. C'mon, Mister Steele."

They loped away, Justin Steele with a puzzled look in his eyes as he wondered about these strange troubles that beset neighboring cowmen.

CHAPTER IV

MANHUNT

Taking Quirt Younger's hint, Matt slept with ready gun, that first night at the 29 Bar. Nothing happened. Next day he swung a long circle through the hills to learn the range, heading toward his appointment in Cottonwood late in the afternoon. It was after dark when he rode into town and, because he was determined to ride straight home after paying the erstwhile 29 Bar men, he tied his mount to a rack beside other horses and slipped a morsel of grain over the animal's ears.

When he stepped into the Territory Bar, he felt the impact of unfriendly eyes. They were expecting him. Grouped at the rear were the oldsters who had first met this Matt O'Shea—nemesis of their crony, Rawhide Preston. Their eyes were flint-like.

Del Donlin swiped idly with his bar rag, his hand on the scattergun, his mouth twisted with hate. The three Matt sought stood at the bar end, shaking dice. At sight of him, they put aside their game and faced him, smiling confidently. Walking up to them, he peeled bills off the roll he had taken from Rimrock Rogers' cache, and paid them.

"There," he said, replacing the roll. "That's the last dollar you steal from 29 Bar. You really owe me money. But when you holler about 29 Bar treatment, it'll be about what I did, not what I didn't do. Savvy?"

"Yeah?" Lon Beadle sneered. "When we holler, Mister O'Shea, it'll be celebratin' yore funeral."

Matt's darting gaze swept that dangerously silent place.

"Sometime," he answered Beadle, "that kind uh talk will draw the lightnin' down on yore heads. An' another thing—don't celebrate my funeral till my gun hand is dead."

Whereupon he turned on his heel and walked out. In the darkness beyond the door, he paused, keening

like some wary wildling. An ominous silence held the town in steely fingers. A chill warning ran up Matt's spine. His hand slid holsterward. Scorp O'Shea's fighting smile graced his face as he catfooted to his horse, his nerves screaming *quidado*—have a care!

In the gloom opposite his horse, he paused again, deeply stirred. All horses had been removed from that rack, save his. An innocent thing? Mebbyso. Mebbyso not. Chuckling, he stepped silently off the walk, strode to his mount. Rubbing the animal's arched neck, he removed the morral, slipped on the bridle and fixed bit and headstall. At the faint rattle of his bridle chains, a commanding voice spoke from the dark . . .

"Now!"

With warrior instinct, Matt whirled away from his horse and went to one knee as the first gun sounded. The bullet whacked the horse and it went down, screaming. Matt snapped a slug at the muzzle flicker, grinned with grim satisfaction at the painful yell that beat skyward.

Other guns opened on him, meshing him at the hub of their arc of fire. Matt flopped unhurt, thrilling to the battle urge, to the lure of the fight against odds. Holding his fire against a later and greater need, he crawled toward the walk. From behind him lifted Quirt Younger's hoarse rasp.

"Nailed 'im, I figger! Swarm out easy, ready on the cut an' shoot!"

Matt got his feet under him, whirled. He glimpsed their onrush as they cleared the star shadows, thumbed the hammer till his gun was empty. Changing position after the manner of successful night fighters. Shadows broke, ducked back. A return fusillade snarled over his head as he scuttled for the walk. High and wide. As his booteheels hit the boards, they volleyed hotly, the lead smashing harmlessly into the false front. Then Matt was across the danger zone, sprinting back between two

buildings, with Younger's hell-crew in hot pursuit.

Into a dark lane! A swift turn to the left! Matt was running hard, but came to a skidding halt as doors commenced to spew townsmen to the man-hunt. They were roaring between the buildings to cut him off. The net was closing. Shadows stalked him on every side as he crouched close against an adobe. It would be a close squeak.

He looked up. A low parapet loomed invitingly against the stars. He stepped on a deeply recessed sill, leaped, caught the crumbly edge. Heaving a leg over, he drew his body up and over. For moments he lay there on the warm roof listening to the roar of the alarmed town. Pound of boots and hoofs . . . yells and curses of excited men . . . toll of the alarm bell in the town hall. In Matt it inspired, not fear, but a dull rage at the range thieves who would have his life, who had slain his pal horse.

A dark blot in the center of the roof intrigued him. He crawled over. It was a wooden canopy over a ventilator. He tried it; found it loose. He listened. No sound came from below. On impulse, he raised the thing, slid down and dropped, letting the canopy thud shut behind him.

He landed with a soft *clump*, froze there with heightened pulse, his hand on his gun. The place was silent, the thick walls even muffling the outer turmoil. Satisfied at last that he was alone, he strode to the lone window that let in the star shine, pulled the shade. He thumbed a match, blew it out and grinned. He was in the sheriff's office where, that very morning, he had looked for Rawhide Preston. Drawing a chair into the corner behind the door, he composed himself to wait for a quiet town.

Matt had been sitting there perhaps a half hour when he heard the clatter of horses drawing up to the rack outside. Voices.

"Well," he heard a plaintive voice

ask, "where at is he? A killer shoots a man down on the main street. You surround him, burn enough caps to win a war an' let him go scot free. What do yuh expect me to do? Nose 'im out an' do with my hands what you couldn't do with guns? Who is he?"

"Matt O'Shea, new owner of the 29 Bar!" Quirt Younger had a ready answer.

"Matt O'Shea?" The voice fell away. "Owner of the 29 Bar. Hell, man, you talk loco. What went with the salty gent?"

"Just up an' disappeared."

"Did, huh? Well . . ."

A heavy tread shook the boardwalk and Justin Steele's officious voice broke in.

"Sheriff Preston! Glad to see you on the job, man. This is an outrage. O'Shea has murdered one of the Circle Dart riders in cold blood. A bad man, a dangerous man. What do you propose doing about this?"

"I don't know," came the sheriff's cool rejoinder. "What are you doin', Steele?"

"I'm putting up a thousand dollars on his head—dead or alive. And I'll bet you that much more it gets quicker results than a childish sheriff that won't wear a gun."

"I'll take that bet, Steele. Now who saw this O'Shea do the killin'? Where's the witnesses? What provoked the shootin'? Give me the hull story."

"It won't take long," came Quirt Younger's sneering voice. "I saw Matt O'Shea walk up to pore Bill Dow an' holler, 'Take it, Rawhide Preston! This squares fer my dad!' Then he shot, givin' Bill no chance to draw. I took a shot at O'Shea, but he got away. That's all."

"An' that's gospel, Sheriff," corroborated someone.

Rawhide snorted. "Sounds crazy to me. How could yuh see all that if it was dark? Well . . . ne'mind. We'll fetch this O'Shea in, but it bet-

ter be alive. We don't condemn no man tuh die on Cottonwood without a fair trial. Git to yore hawsses! We'll throw a five mile ring around the town."

He turned away and Matt heard him stride to the door and open it. As he closed the door behind him, Rawhide thumbed a match and lit the bracket lamp. The light grew on the wick, throwing the room into clear detail. Something made the old sheriff whirl. Matt O'Shea grinned back at him from his corner seat, his gun held easily across his knees. Rawhide stared at the replica of the Scorp O'Shea he had slain twenty years before, at a bitterly smiling youngster rattler-dangerous from the terrible injustice of the bounty money that had just been placed on his head.

"Sit down!" Matt commanded, indicating the swivel chair with the muzzle of his gun.

CHAPTER V ON THE DODGE

Rawhide disregarded the sit order. For minutes, it seemed, he feasted his eyes on this carbon copy of Scorp. Just as handsome, just as capable, just as dangerous, was his verdict. He felt no fear, despite the danger signals he read in the younger man's eyes. He was ready to pay the price of that early zealousness. His will was made.

He had lived a long time and lived it square. He had ridden the Chisholm Trail in the days when cows wore long horns and fuzz tails. Days of buckskin jerkins and long-haired gun-fanners. Days when all the law there was snuggled at men's thighs. Hard days, glorious days, with his pard, Scorp O'Shea, at his stirrup. That friendship, treasured in his later loneliness, was cheap at twice the price of his trouble-ridden old age.

His temper, and Scorps, had dovetailed perfectly. They had never quarreled, even when Scorp got ketched in a gal's loop an' quit their

little Pecos spread to get married, even when they crossed swords some years later, Scorp as the hell-raisin' Hashknife ramrod, Rawhide as Cottonwood sheriff, even as they dueled to the death in the Territory Bar. Likely he and this kid could hit it off the same way, but . . . what was the use?

"Yo're Matt O'Shea!" he announced, hoarsely.

"Yes," Matt announced stiffly. "I came here this mornin'."

"I know," broke in Rawhide. "I'm Rawhide Preston. Twenty year ago I killed yore dad. My right, so they say, but my mistake just the same. If yore nerve is up to it without a slug uh likker, you kin start shootin'."

The youngster's harsh smile faded. "Which is just another way of askin' me to draw down them blood-sweatin' Circle Darts on my head, eh. No, you'll have to ask fer it some fancier'n that, Sheriff. But don't forget, any man'll kill if he's crowded too hard."

Rawhide snorted. "Don't tell me you ain't a killer. Why, I kin see it in yore eyes, same as yore dad before yuh. Then there's this Bill Dow—out yonder."

Matt laughed acridly. "It's plumb disappointin' that I only got one, Sheriff. They jumped me while I was bridlin', shot my hawss an' wasted pounds of lead tryin' to tally me. Quirt Younger leadin' 'em. Why? That's an easy one. I own the 29 Bar, that he's cleaned of stock. He knows I know it. He's gotta rub me out as a cover-up."

His vibrant defense stirred the lawman strangely. He relaxed from bracing against the shock of an expected bullet.

"Shore you didn't kill Bill Dow, mistakin' him fer me?"

"One uh Quirt Younger's damn lies!" snapped Matt. "An' you know it."

"I don't know it," protested the sheriff, "but I've shore got my own idees. A good lawyer kin beat yore

case. But the hull town's aroused an' I'll have to jail yuh."

Matt laughed softly. "Jail me? How? I don't figger on bein' jugged. Why, they wouldn't leave me in there one hour. No, sir, I'm dustin'. An' takin' yore hat an' coat to make it easier. Give 'em up peaceable an' without fuss an' I'll leave you untied . . . if you swear to give me a half hour's start."

Rawhide shook his towsy head. "Nope. Never made a dicker with an outlaw, never will. The second you haul freight outa here, I'll be on yore tail."

"Yo're either stubborn—or crooked," spat Matt, grimly. "From all I've heard you orta be friends with the 29 Bar instead of the Circle Dart." He went bitter. "Talk to me about goin' to jail with this Justin Steele postin' head bounty an' markin' me with the outlaw brand. Not any. I'm hittin' fer the hills till I find just what this is all about. An' God help them that's wrong. Turn around an' stick yore hands behind yuh!"

Some quality in that command made Rawhide obey. Matt had jerked the lawman's coat off and put the piggin' strings on him before that worthy came to a proper realization of how ridiculous he was acting, having already reconciled himself to dying before this youngster's guns. Then it was too late. Matt trussed him like a turkey, gagged him with his own bandana, and rolled him under the desk. Then slipping on Rawhide's coat and hat, he opened the door and stepped into the night. A man clumping down the walk with a lantern crowded close.

"Say, Sheriff," he sang out. "Quirt Younger an' that feiler Steele has went to the Cottonwood House. They want tuh see yuh there, pronto. Room ten, an' mighty important I figger."

"Thanks," gruffed Matt, simulating Rawhide's voice. "I'll poke over."

He stepped past the man, tensely ready should the lantern rays reveal

his identity. They didn't. He drew away and passed several more men on his way to the hotel. But the town was excitedly searching for one who skulked, not one who walked boldly, like Matt.

And so Matt reached the Cottonwood House unaccosted. Like so many of the older Western hostellries, it had an outside staircase. Matt ascended this and entered a poorly lighted upper hall, with rooms giving off each side. He tiptoed down the hall, pausing before room ten. All was quiet. Matt drew his gun, his face set in grim lines. In the bitterness of his new relation to society, he felt it would be a pleasure to kill Quirt Younger and pistol-whip the bounty-placing tenderfoot till he crawled for mercy. Turning the knob, he plunged into the room, gun leveled.

As Matt burst into the lighted room, someone rose from a sofa and stood staring at him with frightened eyes. It was a girl, young and fair and striking in her finely tailored riding togs. A mass of auburn hair framed the ivory oval of her face. Her eyes were brown and straight gazing; her bearing proud, as a daughter of Justin Steele should have been. Her lips parted in a confident smile.

"Is this a joke . . . or something?" she asked in a rich contralto.

Matt didn't answer at once. He had never seen a girl like this one and he stared devouringly until she dropped her eyes. No need to ask her name. Her resemblance to the Eastern capitalist was too striking. And that picture of her, never to fade for him, completely erased the ugly thoughts from his mind, leaving only embarrassment. Flushing, he commenced backing.

"Excuse me . . . er . . . ma'am," he stammered. "I reckon . . . looks like I got in the wrong stall."

"The gun," she said softly, staring at the unsheathed weapon, "were

you . . . were you thinking of shootin' someone?"

"No'm . . . yes'm! Yuh see, m'am, they're chasin' me . . . tryin' to kill me!"

Pity shone in her eyes. "Kill you? Who? Oh, why do men have to be so—so bestial? You're . . . you're . . ."

"Yes'm." He nodded. "I'm Matt O'Shea."

"I'm Moira Steele," she told him. "Did you murder that man out there tonight?"

"No, ma'am!" he said, fiercely. "Murder is a hard word, an' no name fer that. I killed to keep from bein' killed."

"What have you done?"

"Learned too much regardin' the cattle rustlin' of certain Cottonwood parties."

"Is that all?"

"Yes'm."

He stamped a trimly booted foot. "What a shame. You just wait right here till my father gets back. If he don't fix this for you, I'll . . ."

She didn't finish, but Matt knew from her bearing that Justin Steele got the rough poled off him when Moira was around. Matt shook his head, still backing out.

"Thanks, ma'am, but I can't wait. Yore dad has placed a bounty on my head. Ketchin' me, they hang me high, without a trial."

His voice drifted into silence. From below came the tread of boots, Quirt Younger's harsh drawl, Justin Steele's answering rumble. Matt cleared the threshold.

"They're comin' now, ma'am, an' I'm gone. So long."

"Goodbye," she called. "And good luck."

He closed the door, heard the two men hit the bottom of the stairs. Sprinting down the gloomy hall, he slid out on the upper landing of the outside staircase. Looking through the screen, he saw the two men step into the lamplight and pause before the door of room ten. Whispers of their talk came to him.

"O'Shea musta bin in the sheriff's office all the time. Good thing that gunless ol' fossil saw it yore way, Mister Steele, an' resigned. I'll make you a good sheriff. When I take the posse out, you an' Moira hold down the Circle Dart till we fetch in this killer's carcass . . ."

They shook hands and separated, Quirt clumping downstairs, Justin Steele entering room ten. Matt waited till all was quiet, then eased down the stairs. Walking unobserved to the first racked horse he could find, he mounted, cut between two buildings and so left the town without being halted.

So it happened that at ten the next morning, Matt O'Shea looked down from a commanding point of the Hanging Hills. Screened by a motte of piñons, he watched Quirt Younger's posse idling in a cove below him. A dust cloud in the direction of the town grew and materialized into a buckboard, drawn by two dun wagon ponies and toolled by Justin Steele. Moira sat beside him.

Now one of the possemen mounted, jerked down his hat, lifted his bandanna over his nose and spurred out to head the rig. At his shouted command, Steele drew rein. Words passed. The masked posseman drew his gun. Steele lifted his arms and crawled from the rig. The girl's thin scream came to Matt's ears.

The posseman tied his horse at the back of the buckboard, mounted the driver's seat and ran the rig into the cove where his mates waited. The wagon ponies were loosed, the girl was placed on a spare horse with her feet tied stirrup to stirrup, and the whole cavalcade moved swiftly into the hills. Justin Steele trudged along the dusty road toward Cottonwood, his shoulders bowed dejectedly.

Matt had watched the thing with a puzzled frown. The thing didn't make sense. As far as Justin Steele was concerned, his plight afforded the youngster a grim satisfaction.

But Moira . . . Without understanding it at all, Matt knew she was in trouble and that he was taking a hand in the game.

Taking advantage of such cover as the ridge lines afforded, Matt followed Quirt Younger and his possemen. Far back into the fastnesses of the rugged Hanging Hills the way led. About mid-afternoon, Matt was forced to dip into a canyon and climb out on another ridge. When he reached the top, the cavalcade was nowhere to be seen. Nothing moved saved the flashing jays, nervous rock squirrels and, on a brushy hillside, a wary doe and her fawn.

Disturbed, Matt spurred down to where he had seen the posse last, picked up the trail. It led into a maze of rocks where it seemed to split into several trails. Then, in turn, gave onto a shelving, smooth-rock outcrop, flanking a vertical granite scarp. Blown clean by the wind, this terrain gave no clue to the riders that had gone before.

All afternoon Matt searched in vain. And when night fell, he made a cold and hungry camp. Next morning at daybreak, he shot a squirrel, built a small fire and cooked it. He had barely finished his simple repast, when his horse, tethered close by, nickered softly.

Matt leaped for its head, pinched its nostrils and waited. Hoofbeats sounded on the rocks. A rider seemed to burst from a fold in the very face of the rock cliff. It was Rance Martin, erstwhile 29 Bar cowboy. His way would lead almost through Matt's camp. The young owner of the 29 Bar drew his gun.

CHAPTER VI

OUT OF THE DARK

Because the rider's gun-hand was gloved and further encumbered by the rein, he made no move for the big Colt in his chap's pocket. Besides, Matt's weapon covered him steadily.

"Step off yore hawss, feller!" Matt ordered. "An' don't git notions. I'd hate like hell to cut you down in the prime of yore life. Step down, light an' easy, with yore hands lifted."

The man obeyed, stood on braced legs, a little pale but grinning bravely.

"What's yore game, O'Shea?" he asked.

"Where's the posse?" snapped Matt.

"What posse?"

"Don't stall, feller. Lay yore cards on the table an' no harm'll come to yuh."

"An' if I don't?"

"Then," smiled Matt mirthlessly, "I'm tyin' you down in the crick bottom for the magpies to pick. You'll git hungry, but thirst'll cure that. With plenty cold water runnin' right past yore feet. Yore tongue'll swell an' force the gag outa yore mouth. But it'll be too late fer you to yell, an' nobody to hear yuh if yuh did. You'll die with the magpies pickin' out yore eyes an' . . ."

"The posse," shuddered the cowboy, "is in Phantom Valley."

"Where's that, an' how do yuh git there?"

"Quirt Younger'll kill me if I tell."

"An' I'll do the same if yuh don't."

The man talked. In clipped phrases, he told how to reach the old outlaw hideaway known as Phantom Valley. Gathering courage, he told how Quirt Younger had preempted the hidden retreat as a holding ground for cattle with blotched brands, waiting for the market to rise. He described how Younger had inveigled Justin Steele into a partnership, taking notes for the unpaid balance, scheming to make his contract payments impossible so he would lose his Cottonwood interests.

"This," he wound up, handing Matt a note, "is the load calc'lated to break the old man's back."

Matt eyed the rudely scrawled mis-

sive, his smile of triumph giving way to a troubled scowl. It read . . .

Mister Steele:

I've got yore gal hid away plumb safe. Hand bearer fifty thousand dollars an' you'll git her back, safe an' sound. Thousand dollar bills without no markin's or tricks. Pronto! Foller him or refuse this demand an' . . .

Matt O'Shea.

White hot rage ate at Matt's heart. Also a tugging fear for the girl. The fiendishness of Younger's villainy was all too apparent now. How convenient his, Matt O'Shea's, appearance had been to the plans of the Circle Dart boss. Wearing the star of Cottonwood law, employing a score of perjured witnesses, it looked all too simple. Only one thing could beat him now. Matt's hand fell to the butt of his gun and his eyes burned.

"How many men holdin' the Steele gal in Phantom Valley?"

The cowboy counted on his fingers. "Quirt Younger, Lon Beadle an' one . . . three . . . five more, beside me. One'll be guardin' this entrance an' one the back door, out Pine Mountain way."

"Five to face after gettin' in," mused Matt. "Thanks, Rance, you've helped me a lot. You look like a good kid that got stunk up with skunk oil. Here's where the trail forks for you. One way leads to the Big House or a cottonwood caper. The other to a decent life. I'm goin' into Phantom Valley. When I come out, Quirt Younger, Lon Beadle an' some of the others will be dead. An' mebby I will be too. But if I ain't, I'll be lookin' to see which trail you follered."

The cowboy was moved. "I've bin makin' snake tracks when I walk," he admitted, "but what could I do? More'n one of us has tried to quit, but the only way you kin quit the Circle Dart is to be planted. Younger's a devil an' fast as a streak with an iron. Don't think you kin drift yonderly, knock off them boys like stringin' fish. I don't want no part uh that scrap, but show me any other out an' I'll thank yuh till I die."

"Here's yore out, Rance," said Matt. "Fork yore hawss an' ride to the Ladder P. Fetch Rawhide Preston, an' fetch him shootin'."

The cowboy shook his head. "You know that old man don't go in fer guns. Besides I ain't decoyin' no man up here fer you to kill. I've heard what yo're in this country tuh do."

Matt scowled. "If you figger it thataway, fetch Rawhide an' all his cowboys. I reckon they'll do what gunnin' he shies at. But make it fast. We gotta get that gal outa there or . . ."

"I'll do it, pard, bankin' on you bein' square. An' if this mess is ever cleaned up, I'd admire workin' fer the 29 Bar again, under a clean boss."

They shook hands. The cowboy mounted, loped down the draw. Matt watched him go with gloom-drenched eyes. It seemed to him in that moment that he was a man alone in a lonely world. No friends, no followers, a price on his head and death the take in the grim game to come. Lonely and brooding, his thoughts turned to the girl held prisoner in Phantom Valley. And warmth came again to his heart, and a strange measure of comfort.

Night flung its sable mantle over the Hanging Hills. Riding with strange carelessness, Matt moved up the slot that led to Phantom Valley. It was so narrow he could touch with his outstretched fingers the frowning walls that reached to a thin, star-studded rift, far above. Whistling softly, yet warily alert, he splashed up the water-covered bottom, his hand on his gun, his eyes boring the gloom.

Up ahead water splashed and hoofs rasped on stone. A mounted shadow barred the narrow way. A low, signaling whistle sounded. Matt straightened.

"Hey!" he called, spurring his mount. "I got the money, feller, an' likker to celebrate. Kin yuh stand a snort?"

"Kin I?" came a glad answer. "Fetch 'er to me, boy, an' watch my time."

Matt trotted up to him. Their stirrups rubbed. Matt held out his doubled hat. And as the man reached for it, Matt struck, sinking his gun sight just above the man's ear. He pitched silently overside, splashed into the water as his horse snorted a few steps away.

Yonder gleamed a single light, like some leering eye. That light meant a house. The house meant Younger and his hellions. They meant the end of the trail. Matt looked to the loads in his Colt's, tried its heft and walked deliberately toward the old outlaw hangout. He paused just outside the door, hearkening to Quirt Younger's rasp.

"Fifty thousand fer the little lady here an' as much more fer the cattle," he enumerated, "Then my lawyer in Tucson pays me seventy-five thousand fer the Buckskin Mine fer the right to deal off the Arizona Southern. In six months time, we'll be cleaned up here an' settled in Argentine, where a dollar U. S. is worth five. We're all as good as rich."

"Sounds like a cinch, Quirt," came Lon Beadle's laugh. "But how about this Matt O'Shea mebby gummin' up the works. He's nobody's fool, that . . ."

"Let him show," boasted Younger. "I'm prayin' he does. Ain't I sheriff? Ain't he wanted dead or alive fer green money? We'll cut his sign an' throw him in the Cottonwood jail. Way them town folks feel, he'll never last the night. Or mebby we'll gun him down on sight fer the bounty. Yeah, I'm just prayin' he shows his face . . ."

"Yore prayers is answered, Younger!"

A stiff voice spoke from the door, that had opened silently. Matt O'Shea stood there, his face set, his eyes livid. His gun was pouched, and well they knew that had he put it

to work as he entered, some of them would now be dead.

A second ticked away as they stared. Two. Matt's eyes were now on the hopeless ones of the disheveled girl tied in a bunk against the far wall. It seemed to him he detected a flame of gladness burning the gloomy curtains from her eyes, a flame that wasn't working in his. For he knew he couldn't undertake what he had come to do without jeopardizing her life.

Quirt Younger's hoarse yell broke the momentary spell.

"O'Shea! It's Matt O'Shea!"

"Yes, you damned coyotes!" rapped Matt. "Now fight!"

Things happened then, blindingly. As one man, they rose from the table and reached. Matt's hand moved. His tall form lunged sideways and back as five guns roared. As he faded out, they roared headlong through the door after him, their forms silhouetted against the lamp glow. Matt's gun spoke slowly, with measured staccato. Second only, it took. Guns crashed. Men cursed as they fell, mortally hit. Matt's weapon coughed on, slamming lead into that writhing, groaning blot of men. Then it was over.

From within that empty cabin came the girl's hopeless cry.

"Matt! Matt O'Shea!"

"Yes'm!"

Matt walked in, gropingly, unsteadily. He was grinning as he came into the light, a ghastly grimace. He walked to Moira's side, stood looking down at her with dull eyes. Dropping his smoking weapon, he dug out his knife. He had to put it close to his eyes to see to open it. Working like an automaton, he slashed her bonds, his voice coming haltingly.

"I . . . I was scairt, Moira . . . scairt I'd be too late."

Then the ropes parted and he slid down the front of the bunk, clumping on the hewed puncheons. The girl shook off the entangling rope fragments, hit the floor.

"Oh my dear . . . my dear," she sobbed, kneeling beside him. "You . . . you saved us all and we let them kill you."

With the age-old feminine instinct to mother the helpless, she took his limp head in her lap and prayed as she smoothed back his hair from the bloody welt at his temple. And thus Rawhide Preston, Justin Steele and the Ladder P cowboys found them.

Matt opened his eyes to a throbbing head and aching left side. He lay in a bunk with fuzzy figures surrounding him. With clearing vision, he made out the worried face of the cowboy, Rance Martin.

"H'are yuh, Rance?" he murmured weakly. "How'd you make it so pronto?"

"I met . . . met 'em comin' in, hell-bent," stammered the cowboy. "But, darn yore flea-bit carcass, you didn't leave nothin' fer a man tuh to do but dig graves."

Sober-faced Rawhide Preston shoved Rance aside and crowded close. He smiled into Matt's clearing eyes. "Son," he said feelingly, "you've did the Cottonwood a priceless favor this day. Done it with folks chasin' yuh like a sheep-killin' lobo, at a cost of two days runnin' an' two busted ribs. I'm only hopin' now . . ." he flushed with embarrassment, ". . . that you got all the killin' outa yore neck so's you kin forget about me—leastwise till I round up the Ladder P cattle I understand I've got pastured up here, an' till I kin spend the thousand dollars I win from Mister Steele. After all, Matt, you did treat the old man purty rough, rollin' him under his own desk down yonder in Cottonwood."

It was a long speech for Rawhide and Matt scowled.

"That's the third time I've heard that crack about killin' you," he mumbled. "Hell, I never come here to kill nobody. An' besides, killin' you won't bring back the dad I can't remember, the dad who left my mother

to shift for herself. I reckon you had reasons or you'd never 'a' shot him."

"But," broke in Rawhide, "they said you was in the Territory Bar lookin' to pay off an old debt to me."

"I was," grinned Matt, as the light broke. "The debt I was meanin', was the money Rimrock Rogers owed yuh fer his share of that line fence you built. Yuh see, Rimrock was my mother's brother. He died in her home, in Tucson. He left me the 29 Bar an' some money he had buried out there. Also the order to pay you a thousand dollars."

"Oh," breathed Rawhide, also seeing a great light. "I see." And for the first time in long years, he laughed whole-heartedly and without restraint. The ghost of Scorp O'Shea was laid.

"Looks like the drinks would be on you, Preston," chuckled Justin Steele, moving close, "if they weren't on me more so. Moira has been telling me what she learned of this Younger's plans. But for Matt O'Shea, I'd have been completely ruined. Yes, and from other things she has told me of this boy, I'll be proud to rip out that damn line fence and let him run my Circle Dart, along with his own 29 Bar . . ."

"An' don't forget my Ladder P," whooped Rawhide. "Open range again, with each outfit runnin' its own wagon! Yipee-e-e-e! With an O'Shea roddin' the hull shebang."

Justin Steele nudged him. "Ps-s-st! Maybe you and I had better go into conference on that matter, Preston. I think Moira's got things to say to the young man before we turn in for the night. And, I might add, when that girl wants something, she usually gets it."

"Well," Rawhide grinned as he linked arms with the capitalist. "She kin go further an' do a hull lot wuss, Mister Steele. Now where at is that conference you done spoke of? An' just what proof do it run, from the cork down?"

BURNIN' POWDER



ANNOUNCEMENT

Few departments of firearms nature have been received with such enthusiastic support as "Burnin' Powder." During the past year, our legion of readers have shown by written comment that in offering a department such as this, ALL WESTERN is filling a very urgent need. Philip B. Sharpe, staff writer of this magazine, and experimenter, firearms technician and ballistics expert, promises many interesting articles in this department during coming months.

Bring your ideas, your questions, your suggestions to this department. Let's make it better with each coming month. An effort will be made to give a personal reply to all who ask for information pertaining to firearms. Enclose a stamp with your inquiry. This department also offers you a shopping service in firearms, granting a substantial discount to readers through special arrangement with a large New York jobber. No revolvers or pistols sold to minors without written consent from the parents.

No other fiction magazine offers readers this complete service. Tell ALL WESTERN of your problems—it is YOUR magazine.

THE EDITORS.

THAT THERE "LEMON SQUEEZER!"

An early Winter wind whistled through the trees of the central Maine woods. The sun slid from behind a bank of gray clouds to reveal a pair of hunters, heavily bundled in warm clothing, bunched against a once-gallant windfall amid the rustling of beech leaves.

Smoke curled lazily from the writer's pipe as he extracted it and stared thoughtfully into the bowl.

"Kind of quiet up here, Doug," I began. "Not a deer in sight so I think I'll ask a couple of questions, before we start that three mile hike back to camp. I've been thinking about that Smith & Wesson 'Lemon Squeezer' you've been making these many long years. Delving into records of early Western gunmen for dope for 'Burnin' Powder,' I've found that it was one of the most popular auxiliary guns of the 'nineties. How'd that gun get its start?"

Douglas B. Wesson, genial vice-president of Smith & Wesson, Inc., extinguished his cigarette and probed his pockets for a pipe.

"You know, Phil, the famous Safety Hammerless revolver had an origin as dramatic as anything you ever stirred into a fiction story. Here's the story, just as my father told it to me many years ago:

"It was the Fall of 1886—just about this time of year—when D.B. (Daniel Baird Wesson, founder of Smith & Wesson) got the idea. D.B. was sitting at breakfast one morning, reading his paper, when a terrible accident was listed in the news.

"It seems that a local minister was in the habit of taking a double-action revolver to bed with him nights. He kept it hanging on a nail driven into the headboard of the bed, suspended from the trigger guard. The previous night he had heard intruders in the house and hastily reached upward

in the dark for his weapon. Groping fingers found the barrel and started to remove it from the nail. But the trigger had caught, and the weapon was discharged into the head of his wife, sleeping on the pillow beside him.

"That," commented D.B. as he laid aside the paper, "could have been prevented with the right kind of gun. I'm going to build a revolver that will not discharge accidentally."

"Telephones not then being the thing of the day, D.B. sent a messenger to the plant to report that he would not be down that morning. He went to his den and locked the door.

"Late that afternoon, D.B. turned up at the factory with a roll of papers. He did not stop at his desk, but continued into the experimental department where he sought out one of the expert toolmakers.

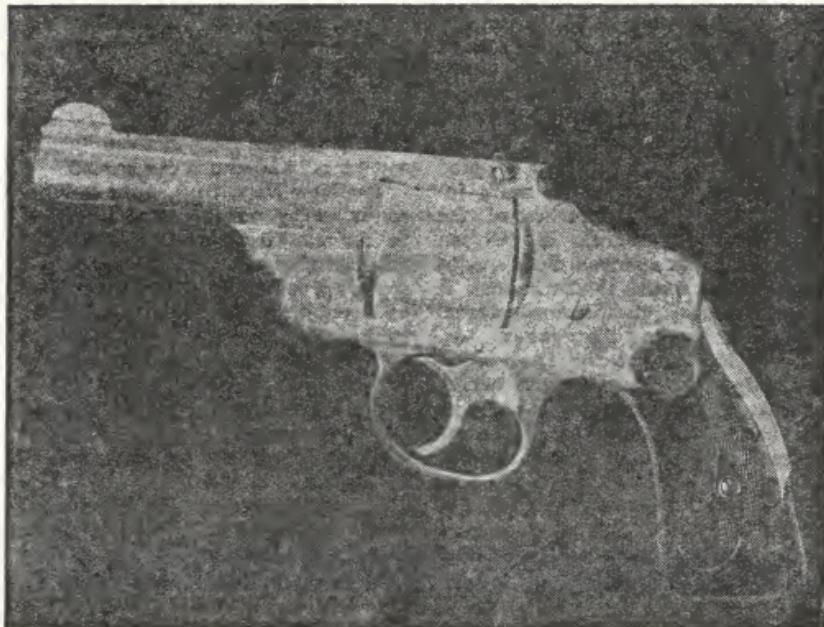
"Here's plans for a revolver which will be safe, even for a child to

handle," he remarked. "How long before you can build me a working model, Joe?"

"Thus was the famous Squeeze Handle revolver born. By the middle of January, 1887, the first gun bearing 'No. 1' passed through the plant. It was chambered for the .38 Smith & Wesson cartridge. Since then, well over a quarter of a million have been manufactured, and it is a tribute to the designer when I state that only four minor changes have been made in the design of the arm in the nearly fifty years it has been manufactured."

Checking literature and reference notes we find that the famous Safety Hammerless model, widely copied both in this country and abroad, has served its time in the development of the West. Short, compact, deadly, it was extremely popular as a gambler's weapon; an auxiliary gun for the peace officer and desperado alike. It was far more reliable than the obso-

"Lemon Squeezer," or famous "Squeeze Handle" .38 Safety Hammerless Smith & Wesson.



lete and inaccurate line of available derringers; and it held five shots instead of one or two.

Early catalogs, even the present ones, list this gun as the "New Departure" model. Early in February, 1888, the .38 Squeeze Handle was followed by a similar gun in .32 caliber. This caliber went through only two changes to the present.

Research in musty files at the Smith & Wesson plant especially for ALL WESTERN readers reveals the true information on the history of the evolution of this famous old smoke-stick.

Beginning in January, 1887, Number 5,000 was reached in 1890. With No. 5,001 came the first change in design. The frame was made sturdier at the rear of the post, the additional metal encasing the barrel catch lifter. The barrel was cut at the rear of the post to conform and the trigger shape was changed, forming a shoulder notch to serve as a stop against the forward motion.

From 5,001 to 42,483 the design remained unchanged. With number 42,484 the barrel catch was again changed slightly and a 6-in barrel model added to the line. No further changes were made to No. 116,002.

From 116,003 to 190,064, the present design of barrel catch was adopted and hardened steel shims were inserted in the stop notches of the cylinder. The Smith & Wesson monogram was stamped on the right side of the frame to distinguish it from the many cheaply made imitations then flooding the market.

With No. 190,065 the front sight was forged integral with the barrel, another slight change was made in the barrel catch, the base pin was pressed in and cross-pinned instead of screwed and ".38 S. & W. Cartridge" was stamped on the right side of the barrel. At this writing, guns going through the plant bear serial numbers around 260,500.

The .32 Safety, from February 1888 retained its original design from No.

1 to 91,417. In September, 1900, the present model was adopted with the pull-up barrel catch and front sight forged integral with the barrel. Numbers now running through the plant are around 243,000.

A question this department often gets concerns the price of these early guns back at the time they first came out. Let's have a look—see some early records.

Back in 1889 the .32 Safety retailed at \$13 and the .38 at \$14. Today the .32 lists for \$26.75 and the .38 at \$29. At the same time the famous Smith & Wesson .44 Single Action was \$13.50 and the .44 Frontier the same. The .44 Double Action sold for \$14.50. Cartridges cost 55c. per box for .32s; 68c. for .38s; and \$1.00 for .44s. Holsters and belt ranges from 75c. to \$1; loading tools cost from \$1.75 to \$2.25 per set. Gold plating at the factory was from \$1 up, depending on the model, and fancy engraving was from \$1.00 up. Doesn't that make your mouth water, fellow gun bug?

The South also took to the famous Safety Hammerless. Down in Kentucky where they have always known how to appreciate guns, the model was known solely under the name of "Squeeze Handle Smiths." The colored gentlemen dubbed them "lemon squeezers" and the name spread.

The New Departure Smith & Wesson is no toy, yet it is most effective. It is not a target weapon and never was intended as such. It can be fired from a pocket rapidly without fear of entangling the hammer with the lining.

"Why does it have such a hard trigger pull?" I asked Mr. Wesson. "I've heard a lot of comments on this undesirable feature."

"That is part of the safety design," he replied. "It is a 'hard' pull. You can't pull it accidentally. You must grasp the grip in shooting position to depress the grip safety lever. You then point it and squeeze with the entire hand, thus pulling the trigger. It isn't perfect for deliberate target

shooting. It was never intended for such work. Even a small woman can shoot it under the stress of the excitement attending the emergency use of a gun, and that is enough. The average small child, should he happen to get hold of a loaded gun of this type, would have neither the stretch of the fingers to reach the trigger, nor the strength to pull it. More safety."

Thus is a gun born. Always the defender of the right in life, until fool anti-gun laws began wholesale disarmament of the law abiding, thus protecting the criminal, this famous old gun which helped to develop, not only the West, but the South and Middle West, came into being because a maker of firearms read of the accidental shooting of a minister's wife.

Congress is about to grind out some new Federal laws which will either prohibit the law-abiding citizen from owning a gun, or make it extremely difficult for him to get one through a complicated licensing system. None of these laws will make it very difficult for the crook, the gangster, or the grafter with political pull.

Thus, readers, it's your move—a self-defense move. Write your Congressmen at once. In detail, explain that you are *not* in favor of further restrictions in the possession of firearms. Do it now, or you'll wake up and find that it is too late. Your present arms will be taken from you, and you will not be permitted to own more. Will you do your part now—or just wish you had a little later?

THE DUPONT HANDBOOK

Recently duPont released a book entitled *Smokeless Shotgun Powders* which should be in the possession of every technically inclined shooter, regardless of whether or not he uses the shotgun. It contains a wealth of ballistic information on powders, powder development, ballistic characteristics of different kinds of powders,

and the effect they have on the action of the shotgun.

This volume, bound with pasteboard covers, contains over 100 pages of real dope prepared by Wallace H. Coxe, Ballistic Engineer of duPont's Burnside Laboratory. It sells for 50c. and can be obtained by writing "Smokeless Powder Department, DuPont, Wilmington, Del."



Collectors, when you write us for information on an old gun, don't ask us for the impossible. Give all the information possible on the gun—every mark, every measurement you can. This month we are quoting two letters, the latter one showing you just what information is necessary to properly identify the gun in question.

Collectors, don't expect the impossible. Records of this department embrace some 3,000 or more old guns. But many times that number have been made. Help us to help you. When you write for information, please give us all data possible, measurements, weights, markings, type of barrel, type of magazine (if a repeater), type of sights, type of stock. One of our friends sent in a new idea this month. He placed a sheet of paper over the vital markings on the metal of the gun and then rubbed the marks with a pencil. The result was a perfect tracing—and it made identification of the model of gun rather simple. This is your department; make use of it.

G. H. Russell of 3470 South 13th Street, Omaha, Nebr., collects rare old firearms and would like to correspond with other readers who are interested in this hobby.

Thanks for the co-operation, brothers. Several months ago a reader asked us if Marlin ever made a *bolt action* single shot. We replied

in detail, and ran a short part of the reply in the Mailbag. The printer left out the words "bolt action" and since that time we have received nearly 150 letters from our friends advising that Marlin built the famous line of Ballard rifles. Of course. Only goes to show what a couple of omitted words can do.

Thus in identifying old guns, a single measurement forgotten may mean the difference between a definite identification and a befuddled mystery. Each Ballard lover who wrote has been thanked. It sure warms the heart to get response like that.

Incidentally, how would you boys like a real yarn on the Ballard, telling the full story of the history of this arm? It's up to you! This department is for the readers of this magazine. If you want to see a feature article on this rifle, write and tell us. If we receive enough requests, it's yours.

You cartridge collectors, here's a problem which has baffled Ye Ed. Lt. E. B. Topmiller, of 1028 Adam Street, Bowling Green, Ky., sent us a drawing of a cartridge we can't seem to identify. Anyone know the answer? Head markings "5 R 83 F." Slightly larger than .45/70 Gov't flat nose, about .47 or .48 caliber, lead bullet

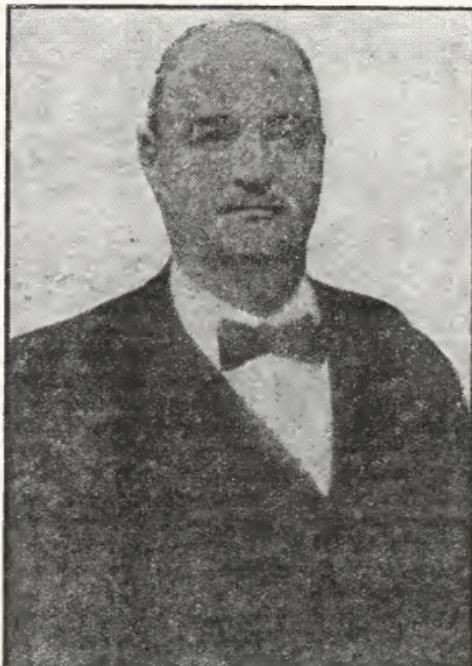
about 550 grains. Shell rim diameter about 5/8, overall length of cartridge about 3 inches.

History. American soldier advancing under fire early in 1918 over territory contested in Franco-Prussian War in 1870-1871. Heavy shell lands nearby, blasting a hole in the ground. The soldier keeps on. Then machine guns get the range and the Yank drops into this new crater. Protruding from the shell-hole wall about four feet from the surface was this cartridge, much dented and corroded through years in the soil.

It couldn't have been a product of the earlier War because the head markings indicate that it is a military cartridge probably made in May, 1883, and probably of German origin. The dented primer

indicated that it had been discarded as a dud. If anyone knows what it is, write Lieutenant Topmiller.

E. A. Tillery, 121 Church Street, Decatur, Ala., writes us about an interesting pistol I fail to find listed in my notes. It is a single shot percussion with no number or date on it, but marked "J. Bishop, London." Plain applewood handle, knife front and notched rear sights, oak ramrod under barrel, round brass barrel, engraved German silver frame, frame tang and



Bat Masterson, fifty years a gunman on the law-side of the Old Frontier West and terror of the outlaw, carries a "Lemon Squeezer" as an auxiliary weapon.

back strap, .48 Caliber smooth bore. Barrel is unusual—20 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches, and overall length is 24 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches.

Mr. Bishop sent us a photo to aid in the identification, but it does not seem to be listed here. Apparently it is one of those made-to-order jobs by a small British gunmaker. There were numbers of them in the old days, and most wealthy users of guns had their own ideas in the style and dimensions of their arms.

One of our readers is a collector of military arms, particularly the military rifles of all nations who participated in the World War. Walter C. Tobie, of 99 Hancock Street, Cambridge, Mass., has a large collection already, but finds it difficult to get many foreign arms in their *original* condition. Most samples he has seen have been altered or remodeled somewhat, thus spoiling them for his collection of "as issued" military rifles. If you have such a gun and think Mr. Tobie might be interested, write him.

A. L. T. of Sandusky, Ohio, wants to know if Winchester ever built a 6.5 m/m Navy sporter. Records indicate that this firm made a sporting model on the straight pull action for the Navy cartridge from 1897 until 1902. A sample I once owned, when compared with a Navy job, showed a few minor changes in gas-escape ports in the bolt and a different design of extractor, but it was essentially the same. The cartridge was never popular, which accounts for its early death. This sporter I had clearly showed the effect of the early powder—most of the rifling was *burned* out of the barrel—not rusted out. Bullets would keyhole consistently. Such a rifle is an excellent thing for a collection—and that's all.

you have clearly. We will prepare your announcement. Give complete descriptions of articles offered. Don't be in too much of a hurry to see your announcement in this department, it takes about two months to get it prepared, printed, and distributed for you.

By the time this is presented to you, Christmas will be a thing of the past, just a vague memory. Yet the mail of the day before Christmas brought a batch of Burnin' Powder inquiries in addition to the usual flood of Christmas cards. One of them was from Mrs. Wilkes, out in California. As this is being written on Christmas Morn, we cannot help but wonder what sort of Christmas the Wilkes children are having. Here is a widow who wants to trade a few articles, evidently the property of her dead husband, for practical things for the children. You collectors who want stamps and foreign money, here's your chance to get some—and to see that a certain boy gets a pair of shoes and his sister gets a sweater. Who'll be the first to respond?

TRADE: Foreign money, all nations, for boy's shoes size 5 $\frac{1}{2}$ and girl's sweater age 12, or any clothing for boy age 15 or girl age 12, whose father is dead. Or baby doll with sleepy eyes 26 inches high, pair boys' riding spurs, small radio, typewriter, or what have you to offer. Also have collection of stamps. Please enclose stamp for a reply. Mrs. M. Wilkes, Star Route, Canoga Park, Calif.

SELL: Marlin Model 50 .22 automatic repeating rifle, 6 shot, for high speed and regular. New Condition. \$9. Also Stevens Visible Loading Model 70 .22 repeater, perfect barrel, \$5.50. Edward Wendling, Box 339, Amsterdam, N. Y.

WANTED: Set of Dayton racing wheels for T or A Ford, used, with or without tires. Will pay cash. W. Roach, 5615 Maple, St. Louis, Mo.

TRADE: 250 different U. S. stamps value from 1c. to 10c. each; radio parts easily worth \$3; two years Radio News magazines; 25 other scientific magazines. Trade any or all for past issues Argosy, or what have you? Also have two-tube radio code transmitter, sell or trade. Alfred Vasko, R.F.D. No. 3, Delta, Ohio.

SELL OR TRADE: 12 gauge single shotgun, good condition; Rifle .22 W.C.P., good, Revolver, .38 S&W short, square butt, walnut stocks, good condition; .22 Stevens single shot rifle, fair; pair white angora hair chaps; basket stamped belt. Will consider guns, field glasses, radios or

WILL YOU SWAP?

This service is free to readers of ALL WESTERN. State your wants and what

what have you? Jack Saunders, Hays, Kansas.

SELL OR TRADE: Buescher Fluegle horn, more mellow than cornet, cost \$95, sell for \$35 or trade for new Colt Woodsman, 6-inch barrel, or new .300 Savage rifle or new blued finish Colt .45 New Service 5½-inch barrel. L. W. Gieble, Box 551, Barstow, Calif.

TRADE: 12 gauge single Iver-Johnson; 1-inch micrometer, like new; Film pack Kodak 3½x4½; Little Blue Books; U. S. Coins; Non-fiction instruction folders, booklets, courses, stamps; 1c. play slot machine basketball game, cost \$19, like new; street car tokens, newspapers, match covers. **WANT:** fine foreign stamps, Indian and large pennies. John Kostillo, Benwood, West Va.

TRADE: Colt .32 automatic pistol for good double shotgun or larger pistol. Rare foreign stamps and coins for any kind of clothing, men's or women's. Dr. Edmundoz, Zolfo Springs, Fla.

SELL OR TRADE: Graflex 4x5 speed camera with Bausch & Lomb f. 4.5 Tesser, focal plane shutter speeds up to 1/1000 second, 4x5 film pack adapter and 2½x3½ reduced adapter, first class condition for \$40 cash, or trade. Imported .32 revolver 6-inch, new, for .22 long barrel revolver. Enclose stamp for reply. J. S. Biscay, R.F.D. No. 8, Toledo, Ohio.

TRADE: Federal Art course costing \$140 or a Pen and Ink cartoon course complete for .25 or .32 Colt autos in perfect condition. W. C. Crump, 1529 Maple Street, Pasadena, Calif.

SELL OR TRADE: .22 revolver, rifle, new riding boots, car radio, etc. **WANT:** good serviceable stock saddle small seat. A. A. Frick, Waterloo, Indiana.

WANT: H & R Handy Gun, .22, .32-20, or .410. Have Colt, Remington, Starr and other cap and ball revolvers and firearms. A. Mann, 415 Hapgood, Athol, Mass.

SELL OR TRADE: Neuner & Hornsteiner fine violin; S&W and Colt revolvers; Indian relics. **WANT:** L. C. Smith shotgun and Colt revolvers. B. C. Campbell, 500 West Lincoln Street, Tullahoma, Tenn.

SELL OR TRADE: Electric tattoo outfit, professional type, new; violin and bow in case (Stradivarius model); portable victrola, new, with records; Crosley Gembox Radio, speaker and tubes new; I.C.S. salescourse, new condition; good banjo. **WANT:** Printing press, typewriter, accordion, or what have you? Mrs. A. Eyre, 414 Liberty Street, Camden, N. J.

TRADE: Sheet music and phonograph records for different selections of records. A. R. Stites, Route 2, Geneseo, Illinois.

WANT: Smith & Wesson Regulation Police, .38 cal., in good condition except that barrel and cylinder may be in poor shape or pitted. Give full description and lowest cash price. **SELL:** White duck paraffined waterproof auto camping tent 7x9 feet, soiled. \$6, express collect. .45 Colt Double Action Army (New Service) Model 1909, Perfect inside, much holster wear on finish. Colt charges \$3.50 to re-blue. Only \$19 with half-box smokeless

.45 Colt ctgs. New spare cylinder, \$1 with gun—\$1.50 if sold separately. 8-Power French binoculars, newly factory overhauled, in worn but serviceable leather case. \$10. German camera, folding, used 9x12 cm. film packs or 3½x4½ packs. Compur shutter, speeds 1 second to 1/250 second, Zeiss, Tessar f. 6.3, lens. With 1 plate holder, 3½x4. \$18. Powder scales, accuracy better than 1/25th grain, \$6. P. B. Sharpe, All Western Magazine, 149 Madison Avenue, New York City.

TRADE: Marlin Ballard .44-75 in perfect condition. Trade for .270 Winchester, .30 Remington Auto, or .300 Savage. Carl Ostrom, Oglivie, Minn.

TRADE: .25-35 Winchester carbine, rifle butt stock, fine shape, like new; .32-20 Savage Model 23, good; .38 S&W Perfect model 3½ inch barrel, nickel-plated, pearl grips, fine; 16 gauge Baltimore Arms Co. double shotgun 28-inch barrels, good; .22 Stevens Offhand, good; .45 Colt Single Action 5½ inch blued, wood grips, good—will trade for guns in perfect shape. **WANT:** Winchester Model 12 shotgun, raised rib in 12, 16 or 20 gauge; 26 or 28-inch barrel, full or modified; .44 S&W target revolver; .38 S&W special target; .38 Colt Officers' Model Target, 7½ inch; .270 or .30-06 Winchester—or what have you? Roy Bradley, R.F.D. Box 223, Santa Maria, Calif.

TRADE: Standard Tool Company 7-shot studd trigger, 3-inch tip-up barrel, .22 pocket revolver, made in 1871. For what? B. C. Campbell, 500 West Lincoln Street, Tullahoma, Tenn.

WANT: Short barreled .22 revolver or automatic for \$7 or will trade my binoculars for it. Stamp, please. John T. Ney, General Delivery, Middlesboro, Ky.

SELL: Ship models and men's den lamps made from old pistols and revolvers. Will rebuild your old pistol into a lamp at a reasonable price. Send stamps. J. H. Vann, 94 Westland Street, Hartford, Conn.

WANT: Will pay cash or will trade for ivory, bone or wood pistol grip blanks for .22 target revolvers. Elaborate description of grain or markings required; also holster and belt leather, uncut; and small .22 pistol in perfect condition. Send prices and offers. All letters answered. Arthur Dodge, 120 Euclid Avenue, Haddonfield, N. J.

SELL OR TRADE: Speedograph duplicator, good condition, cost \$125; also imprint circular business. Sell cheap for cash or trade for typewriter; adding machine; printing, or anything useful to me. Want offers. Francis Lichon, 634 South Park Street, Saginaw, Mich.

TRADE: 25 issues QST, 25 issues Short Wave Craft, 15 issues Radio Craft, 12 issues Radio News, 25 issues Radio World, The ABC of Television by Yates. Want good watch for the lot, or books on botany or biology. James B. Reid, Box 105, Mathiston, Miss.

WANT: Specimens of following shells for collection: All of the .56 Rim Fire series; .44/77 Sharps necked, .44/90 Sharps straight, .44/105/520 Sharps Creedmore, .44/95/550 Peabody-Martini, the .40/70 family (Sharps straight and necked, WCF,

Ballard, etc.) .50/115 Bullard Express, .44 Colt Thuer pat. taper case, .35/120/550 34" Sharps, etc., and one each of the .4, .8, .14, .24, .28 and .32 gauge shotgun shells. Have to trade, a number of cartridges for the collector including all types of Army issue bullets. Also have some 200 old coins dating back to 1498 to trade for cartridges. Lt. Edwin B. Topmiller, 1028 Adam Street, Bowling Green, Ky.

TRADE: Old S&W brass frame rim fire 1856 patent; Ithaca 12 gauge double 20-inch hammer riot gun; Barker 10 gauge 32-inch hammer double; 12 gauge single Nitro Hunter; 12 gauge pump 30-inch; .22 Geco bolt action. L. C. Artrip, Coeburn, Va.

TRADE: Sharps four barrel .32 rim fire derringer, fine; Stoeger bolt action single shot target pistol, .22 caliber, new; U. S. Trench knife with knuckles on hilt and two other daggers; WANT: Colt or Smith & Wesson revolvers or automatic, any make. Frank Wheeler, 121 North Locust Street, Osborne, Kansas.

WANT: Good car radio. Will trade guns for it. Specify make of radio and what you want. Frank McDaniels, 123 North First Street, Osborne, Kansas.

TRADE: Have Pep and Snappy magazines; football helmet; .25 Colt Automatic; tandem for motorcycle; Indian Chief '74" 1926 model. WANT: pump or automatic 12 gauge shotgun, motorcycle, knives, baseball goods, or anything of value. Give description of goods. W. T. Lewis, R.F.D. 1, Paris, Tenn.

SELL OR TRADE: H&R .22 Special 6" revolver, 7-shot; .38 H&R hammerless, 5-shot. The .22 has a holster and belt with 25 pocket loops on belt for cartridges. The .38 has hip pocket holster. Trade either for a .25 auto or both for a .32 or .45 auto. Edwin L. Baker, 368 Bird Avenue, Buffalo, N. Y.

TRADE: Fishing rods for rifles, singly or in quantity. New goods only. Jerome Stanfield, Box 56, Highland Mills, N. Y.

SELL: 410 Springfield shotgun, good as new, \$5; G. M. Wheeler 17 jewel watch made by Elgin, \$18—or what have you? G. T. Auxier, Harris, Missouri.

SELL OR TRADE: 3x5 printing press in almost new shape, \$14. Printing supplies, chemicals and radio parts. Swap for what have you? Jerry Tomcal, 2216 So. Clinton Ave., Berwyn, Illinois.

TRADE: .22 Remington rifle, three pair ice skates good condition, U. S. coins, large pennies, Indian heads, scarce 1922 Lincoln, old style U. S. Stamps and commemorative issues and hundreds of foreign stamps. Want bicycle, motorcycle, binoculars, revolver or pistol. Weston A. Negley, Box 43, Eldorado, Nebraska.

SELL: Whelen outdoor range scope stand, \$1; Savage old model 1919 .22 target rifle, good as new, \$11; Winchester Lee 6 m/m Navy Sporter, a rare rifle, barrel poor, but in shooting condition, only \$6. WANT: .22 Mossberg Model 40 repeater; Mexican Army 7 m.m. Mauser; Turkish Army 7.65 m/m Mauser; Japanese Army 6.5 m/m Mauser; and French tubular magazine model Lebel Military rifle.

These rifles wanted for a collection, should be in good or fair condition, complete, and not "altered" or "remodeled." W. C. Tobie, 99 Hancock Street, Cambridge, Mass.

WANT: Small moving picture camera and projector. Give full details and price wanted first letter. Enclose stamp. Walter Beatty, Eastern News Company, Portland, Maine.

TRADE: .45 Colt auto, .22 H&R Target, .22 Mossberg repeater, Oliver Typewriter No. 5, wrist watch and several other articles. WANT: binoculars, field glasses, steel or Hawaiian guitar, .20 gauge Remington pump, Hawaiian guitar course. C. M. Hughes, R.F.D. 2, Lawrenceburg, Tenn.

TRADE: Forty-four books, wide assortment, fiction and non-fiction, complete list available; also Union Racer ice skates on shoes, Spaulding baseball shoes, etc. WANT: .16 gauge double, good condition, .22 Remington auto, or fresh water fishing tackle. Enclose stamp for reply and complete list. Edwin M. Church, 925 Second Street, Rensselaer, N. Y.



Fellow Powder Burners, this is your department. The Firearms editor will answer all inquiries direct by mail to all enclosing stamp regarding firearms problems, discounts on new firearms, and other subjects. Do not ask for "all" of the literature available on firearms unless you enclose 20c postage. Be sure that your name and address are clearly printed on your letter. Dozens of inquiries go unanswered each month because we cannot read the address. Many others are returned to us undelivered because we guessed wrong in replying. Do your part—write clearly. No letters answered unless stamp is enclosed.

To A. W. C., ALBANY, N. Y.—The most economical rifle scope suited for hunting is the Weaver, built by W. R. Weaver, 1032 Waterworks Road, Newport, Ky. This hunting scope for your Savage Hornet will weigh about 13 ounces with mounts, is 3 power and has a 30-foot field at 100 yards. Optically it is equivalent to scopes costing double, yet sells for only \$19, complete with mounts. It is adjustable for elevation and windage and quickly detachable. Having used one for nearly a year, I can state that it stands up as well as any scope I have ever used.

TO A. T. B., NEW YORK CITY—Your rifle is the famous Winchester Model 1873, discontinued about 1923. If it is in good condition, it is safe to use, but don't try

the High Velocity loads. Ask at your local sporting goods store for .38-40 W.C.F. smokeless cartridges, either with lead bullet or the soft point. The lead bullets would be more kind to that soft steel barrel. Black powder is dirty and fouls the barrel rapidly. It should be cleaned every five or ten shots.

TO J. G., COLUMBUS JCT., IA.—Back copies of any Burnin' Powder department can be obtained either through the department or by writing Circulation Manager, All Western Magazine, 149 Madison Ave., New York City and enclosing 10c. for each copy wanted plus 4½c. postage. Yes, you will find the H&R Single Action Sportsman an excellent target revolver. It will cost you \$16 through this magazine.

TO P. A. M., JR., NEW YORK CITY.—The Winchester 60-A will cost you \$12.80 through this magazine. There is no discount on parts. You cannot own a revolver or automatic pistol in New York state without a permit. Better take this matter up with your father and have him apply to your police department for a permit. We cannot undertake to sell revolvers to minors without written consent of the parents. Regarding silencers. There is but one firm still making them. They are none too practical, and most states have a law against their use. A silencer will NOT work on ANY revolver or automatic pistol, regardless of stories you have read or statements of policemen. I have a personal signed statement to this effect in my files, written by the inventor of the silencer. I have experimented with them and verified this statement.

TO N. O'C., CHICO, CAL.—The best place for you to purchase reloading supplies, including bullet metal, powder, shells and primers as well as loading tools, is the Pacific Gun Sight Company, 424 Balboa Street, San Francisco, Calif. The expense to you of getting supplies from the east would be excessive.

TO R. B., CUCAMONGA, CAL.—Sorry we can't enter into a real discussion of the infamous Ross rifle in this department. It would become too involved. Regardless of its defenders, this rifle, particularly in the .280 caliber, is unsafe. All firearms editors are agreed on this point for the very simple reason that we have file records of many blown up guns in which the shooter or bystanders were killed or maimed. If you want that Ross, buy it cheaply enough so it can be used as a wall decoration. The Dominion Cartridge Company, only maker of ammunition in Canada, the home of the Ross, considers the .280 so dangerous that they will not make the ammunition for it.

TO F. P., WESTFIELD, MASS.—You will find a detailed article on holsters in the October, 1933, Burnin' Powder. You will find this information of use if you contemplate quick draw holsters. A copy will be sent you on receipt of 10c. plus 4½c. for mailing.

TO H. L. C., ALVARADO, TEX.—Thanks, old man, for your excellent letter complimenting this department. We're

human—we like praise! And coming from a rifleman who can do his stuff as you did in the President's Match at the 1927 National Matches—I saw you shoot—the compliment is doubly appreciated. Funny, but I received a letter only a couple of weeks ago from that chap from Nevada who cut your tent ropes during that thunder storm—remember him? His pal and business partner and member of the Nevada Civ. team died last summer.

TO K. S., GREENVALLEY, ILL.—Sorry, brother, but I'm not a sheep herder, and can't tell you much about the animal except that I like kidney chops before they become mutton. Suggest that if you are really interested in raising these woolly fellows, you write the Department of Agriculture, Washington, D. C. asking for their bulletins on the subject. The Montana State Chamber of Commerce could give you the dope on farm lands there.

TO L. T., ST. JAMES, MINN.—You've asked for prices on nearly every gun made. By the time we had them all typed out for you, the first of the list would be obsolete. If you'll be more specific in your inquiry, I'll gladly see that you get the latest quotations. Incidentally—and this applies to other readers of this department—when we quote you on a gun, the price is subject to change without notice. In these days there are many price changes in firearms. So remember this—we will always purchase for you as economically as possible, but the matter of price changes is entirely out of our hands.

TO V. H. J., SARASOTA, FLA.—The changes you outline for the Single Action Colt are not practical. They would be expensive and even if they worked, would not be satisfactory, even to you. Then you would find yourself with a lemon on your hands—you will have spoiled a perfectly good gun, and would find no one willing to purchase it. However, nothing is impossible to a crank. I know how you feel—I've spent many good dollars experimenting with impractical brainstorms; but who can say I have not had my money's worth out of it in pure fun? Go to it if you want to spend the money, but remember that it will be merely buying experience.

TO M. G., CHILLIWACK, B. C., CANADA—If you chaps up in Canada don't happen to have United States postage, don't worry. We'll try to answer your inquiries just the same. As for Pawnee Bill, no, I did not know him personally. Sorry. And I never knew anyone who knew anyone who knew him personally. Pawnee went to the Last Round-up many years ago. Your local public librarian can give you complete historical data on Pawnee Bill far more detailed than a letter could do.

TO H. M., WEST HAZLETON, PA.—Sorry we cannot sell Army rifles or other Government supplies. These are sold only to members of the National Rifle Association and then direct from Government

arsenals. The same applies to Government ammunition.

TO G. M. H., HUNTINGBURG, IND.—The H&R Sportsman is an excellent gun for the price, either in single or double action models. I have three of the single actions, and there are 15 others in my club, and all stand up unusually well. The single action model will cost you \$16 and the double action job \$12, F.O.B., New York City.

TO M. H. G., PENSACOLA, FLA.—The Savage automatic shotgun standard grade, 16 gauge, will cost you \$33.80, F.O.B., New York City. Shells are usually sold at a discount of 20% off list, but in the case lot quantities the discount is greater.

TO M. H. S., SELF, ARK.—The Remington automatic shotgun standard grade, 12 gauge, will cost you \$42.72, F.O.B., New York City.

TO A. G., ELMHURST, L. I., N. Y.—Luger pistols are not nor have they ever been manufactured in this country. There are but two calibers—the 7.65 m/m or .30 caliber and the 9 m/m or .38 caliber. I have owned seven Lugers and would not give over \$5 each for them. I have yet to see the Luger which would not break some vital part in rough service. They are not as rugged nor as reliable as an American made handgun. If you must have one, though, get the 9 m/m caliber. The sole merit of the Luger is in the balance. Material is very poor unless you pick up a real old prewar job or one of the new high grade jobs sold by Stoeger in New York City for around \$55 to \$65. If you want a real powerful gun, though, get a Colt or Smith & Wesson heavy frame revolver in the .38 Special caliber and use the .38/44 S&W cartridge.

TO D. E. D., RIVERTON, UTAH.—The best low price bolt action repeating .22 rifle is the Mossberg Model 40 which will cost you \$10.36, F.O.B., New York City.

TO G. M. C., HALIFAX, N. S., CANADA—The Model 1917 Revolver used by the United States during the World War was made by both Colt and Smith & Wesson. The former was their standard New Service .45 chambered and altered to handle the .45 automatic cartridge, a rimless shell, in clips of three. The Smith & Wesson model was their standard .44 Military similarly altered. Both guns had 5½ inch barrels. This revolver as made by Smith & Wesson was used by the Canadian Expeditionary Force and by the British armies during the World War, but chambered for the British .455 Mark II cartridge. Both guns are still on the market and are widely used in this country by police and target shooters.

TO W. E. G., OBION, TENN.—The Remington standard grade automatic shotgun will cost you \$42.72, while the Winchester Model 1912 will cost you \$38.32. The Winchester automatic shotgun has been discontinued.

TO J. A. A., HOLLY, MICH.—When

you first wrote, you asked for prices of the entire Winchester, Colt, Smith & Wesson Remington and Savage line of guns. Along comes your postcard asking us to figure the "price to you" of every model less 20% after we had mailed you the retail price lists. Why?

TO R. B., YOUNGSTOWN, OHIO—The Stevens Favorite .22 with octagon barrel will cost you \$7.68. Shipments are made on most guns from New York City, express charges collect. Those not in stock are shipped direct to you charges collect from the factory.

TO W. P. G., KINGS MOUNTAIN, N. C.—The Remington High Speed .22 Long Rifle in your Stevens Model 75 should give a muzzle velocity of around 1,350 feet per second. DON'T try to use this cartridge on deer, even with the hollow point bullet. It is good for rabbits, woodchucks, squirrels, and such, but nothing else. Use hollow points for hunting and solid bullets for target practice.

TO W. L. W., TOLEDO, WASH.—Since you desire to discard your rifle in favor of a heavy revolver capable of doing a rifle's work on deer, bear and wolves, I'd suggest the Smith & Wesson, .38/44 Outdoorsman. Sights are important, hence get the target job. The S&W adjustable sights are as rugged as fixed sights, thus enabling you to sight your gun in with the cartridge you desire.

I used such a revolver quite successfully on my last hunting trip, and found that the Remington .38/44 cartridge was a good killer though I used a special high velocity hollow point hand load mostly. For partridge and other small game I used the .38 Special mid-range wadcutter. It killed cleanly without destroying much meat. For woods work I would suggest the McGivern Gold Bead. Have your holster made to order by Hardy, Heiser or Myres and you will find that target sights will bother you none at all in a quick draw.

I would suggest that you have Smith & Wesson round the corners of your rear sight slide (no charge on a new gun). Regarding the power of the .38/44 cartridge. Doug Wesson was telling me the other day that he had a dozen reports from men who had used it successfully on deer and bear the past season. Ballistically it has as much power and penetration at 200 yards as the standard .38 Special cartridge has at the muzzle.

TO C. E. N., BIRMINGHAM, ALA.—I do not know of a standard make of detachable stock for revolvers similar to that used on the Luger carbine. D. W. King, 555 Howard Street, San Francisco, Cal., makes a very excellent combination holster and stock for the .22 Colt Woodsman automatic pistol. I have used one and found it to be quite effective. The holster attached to the belt by means of a strong steel spring clip instead of a loop, can be quickly detached, and the butt of the pistol slips into a spring clip socket at one end. The holster is made of heavy saddle leather, reinforced by a steel wire

insert. If you desire to use this model gun as a rifle, you will find this quite satisfactory—but keep your nose away from that recoiling breech block.

TO P. J. K., Vineland, N. J.—It looks as though you have one of the genuine Henry rifles. Better hang on to it if it is in good shape—you have an interesting souvenir. This gun was once used by the Army. From July 23, 1863, to Nov. 7, 1865, the New Haven Arms Co. manufactured 1,732 rifles of this model for the War Department. Two regiments of Major-General Dodge's command during the famous March through Georgia were armed with Henrys. Your rifle was among the last few arms manufactured as my notes indicate that "about 10,000 were constructed."

You can thus place the date of manufacture as late in 1865 or early in 1866. This rifle took the .44 Henry flat nosed rim fire cartridge. The bullet weighed 200 grains and was driven by 28 grains of black powder. Winchester later loaded this cartridge with a 200 grain pointed bullet and 26 grains black powder. Winchester still manufactures ammunition for this rifle.

TO C. C., BRILLIANT, ALA.—Your Hanover Arms Company shotgun is a low priced oldtimer. Sorry I cannot give you any information regarding it or the purchase of parts for it. Frankly I would not advise the repair of an old hammer gun since it usually costs many times more than the repaired gun is worth.

TO A. R. P., DUBUQUE, IA.—Your Pieper shotgun was made by H. Pieper at Liege, Belgium, before the World War. It may even have been made before 1900 since Pieper is a very old and reliable firm. As to quality—Pieper makes good guns, but the firm also has a low priced line and from your description it is hard to classify your gun. I'd use it for a brush gun and steer clear of the high velocity loads as a matter of safety.

The .351 Winchester automatic cartridge is highly unsatisfactory since it is ballistically no better than the none-too-powerful .38/40. The .35 Remington would be all right, but I have yet to see the automatic arm which did not balk at the wrong time regarding the shooting demonstration you saw. Some men can shoot both eyes open, while others cannot. If you can, learn that way—it will help your shooting.

If you can't, don't waste time trying. As for the writer, he uses peep and telescope sights on his rifles and closes his left eye, because his left eye is his master eye. In shooting pistols and shotguns he keeps both eyes open, as there is less eye strain. . . .

The lever action rifle is by no means the fastest for hunting. A trained bolt action shooter can be as fast as a trained lever man. And for long shots, the man with a bolt gun can do better shooting than the lever equipped hunter primarily because the bolt action sporting rifles will shoot far more accurately than the lever models. Of all levers the Marlin appears to be the fastest, and the Savage the strongest.

TO J. D. W., ORTONVILLE, MINN.—If you want to study Fitzgerald's quick draw data, you might get a copy of his book, "Shooting," published by the G. F. Book Company, Box 452, Hartford, Conn., as it is a very interesting book for shooters. Two other very excellent books are "Pistols and Revolvers," by Julian S. Hatcher, and "American Pistol Shooting," by Maj. W. D. Frazer. Both of the latter can be obtained from the Small Arms Technical Publishing Company of Marines, Onslow County, North Carolina.

Your Colt Single Action marked .38 W.C.F. takes the .38 Winchester Center Fire or the .38-40. Ask for the cartridges under either title but be sure that they do not give you the HIGH VELOCITY RIFLE CARTRIDGE as it would be dangerous in your gun.





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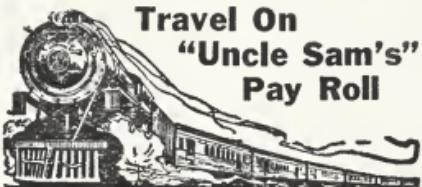


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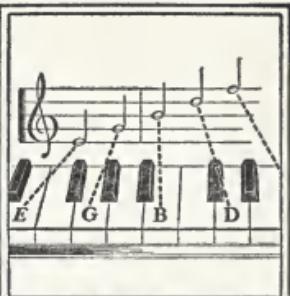
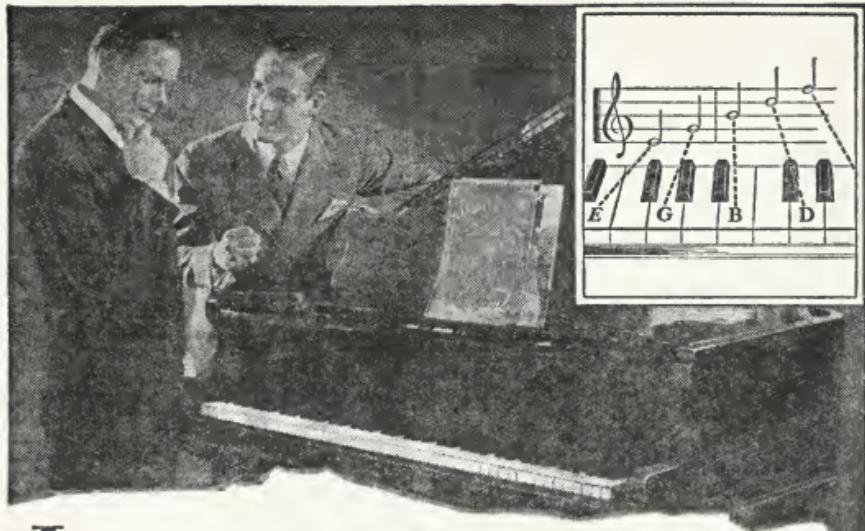
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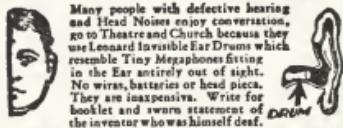
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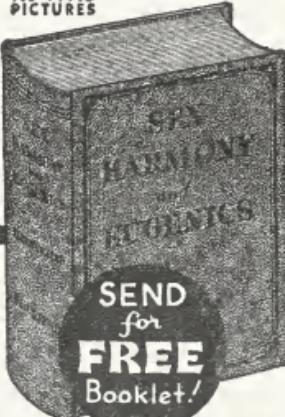
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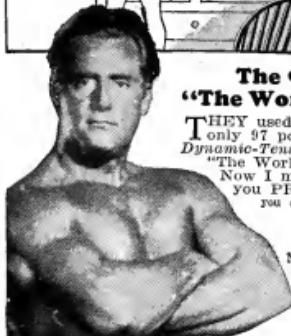
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